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# Looking Like What You Are: Race, Sexual Style and the Construction of Identity.

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**LOOKING LIKE WHAT YOU ARE:  
RACE, SEXUAL STYLE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

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## Abstract

This project explores the function of body politics in constructing minority identities, or how people's physical and stylistic attributes are invested with meanings about who they are. It is interested in how race and sexual differences are defined in the confluence of discourses around visibility and invisibility. The first two chapters set up the parameters of in/visibility with regard to sexual and racial differences in readings of two paradigmatic texts about visibility, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, which produces the lesbian as visible in the figure of the butch, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which explores the paradoxical notion that dark-skinned African-Americans' "high visibility" actually renders them invisible. Chapter 3 reflects on the comparison between racial and sexual paradigms of visibility enacted by the structure of Chapters 1 and 2 through a reading of Blair Niles's 1931 novel *Strange Brother*. Chapter 4 argues that the pattern of identification is central to the way I analyze structures of visibility in the first three chapters. It begins with a reading of Homi Bhabha's theory of the stereotype as a form of fetishism, and moves into a reading of three novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, which are interrelated in that each of the latter two novels rewrites the text(s)

which precede it. The last chapter, "How to Recognize a Lesbian," analyzes the status of the relationship between identity-formation and visibility within current feminist criticism. It examines how the construction of the identities "butch" and "woman of color" as visible leads to the displacement of those who do not "look like what they are" (women of color who can "pass" for white and femme lesbians who can "pass" for straight) from the communities feminism intends to represent. Reading the theoretical/autobiographical texts of Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldua in connection with critical responses to those texts by both white feminists and feminists of color, the chapter argues that strategies of visibility are sometimes deconstructed, but also reinscribed to underpin the construction of lesbian identity within contemporary theories of race, gender and sexuality.

## **Introduction: In/visible Differences**

### **The Anecdote**

I was initiated into the intricacies of lesbian sexual style when my first lover, ML (butch for Mary Lou), announced that there was such a thing as a "lipstick lesbian" and that I probably was not the only one even though she could not acquaint me with any peers. It was at a New Year's Eve party at which I had met her friends from the rugby team. As she requested, I wore my Christmas present from her, a vintage sweater that had belonged to her grandmother, cashmere with a mink collar and pearl clasps. I was the only one there not dressed in flannel and jeans, except for ML, who had generously agreed to don a gold lame shirt to make me feel less out of place. I sensed that her teammates were skeptical about me when I was introduced. They smiled quickly, shook my hand, and broke off into pairs and trios with their drinks. I mingled long enough to be informed which of the guests were ML's ex-lovers. The ice did not really break until someone suggested we play a word game. Everyone took seats and formed a circle. I chose an armchair and ML sat at my feet. In the middle of someone else's turn, ML turned and lifted the hem of my long swishy skirt to peek underneath. I smiled and lightly popped her on the head, and the rest of the women burst into laughter.

The gesture both marked and recuperated my difference in a way that eased the mistrust of women whose codes of recognition did not include the sexual style "femme" but did acknowledge, if not overtly then tacitly, the sexual style "butch"--or at least the eighties version of it, the ubiquitous flannel-shirts-and-jeans lesbian drag.<sup>1</sup> I'm still not sure exactly what made the gesture work to that effect. It plays on the heterosexual oedipal scenario in which anatomical difference figures sexual difference and then reduces it to an instance of visible perception (the little boy looking up the little girl's dress). But between women, the peeking signifies not sexual difference (assumed to be anatomical difference), but differences of gender/sexual identity<sup>2</sup> within the category "female," so that it becomes a joke about sameness as much as difference. Perhaps the emphasis on sameness alleviates the discomfort about differences in sexual style that initially created suspicion. It may also be that the action, initiated by a butch woman, marks the femme as the object of sexual interest in a way that includes her in a community where she is not accepted at face value.

I begin with this anecdote as a way of situating myself in relation to the issues of visibility that interest me. It is the sensation of being invisible as a lesbian in a community where, as commentator on lesbian culture Pat Califia puts it, "butches think of femmes as

straight girls taking a sapphic vacation from serving the patriarchy" (10) that prompted me to think about the construction of identities through the trope of visibility. Privileging visibility has become a tactic of late twentieth-century identity politics, which often symbolize their demands for social justice by celebrating visible signifiers of difference that have historically targeted them for discrimination. For example, the lesbian and gay community gives symbolic power to cross-dressing as a signifier of homosexuality by selecting a drag queen to be "Miss Gay Pride" for the annual June Pride march and sending her down Fifth Avenue in a convertible. Similarly, the Black Power Movement's slogan "Black is Beautiful" gives symbolic value to skin color and ethnic styles as signifiers of racial difference by reversing Eurocentric definitions of beauty.

This privileging of the visible plays on what Marjorie Garber describes as the "hegemonic cultural imaginary's" desire to see and interpret otherness in order to "guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position into question" (130). Based on such analysis, feminist and lesbian and gay theorists have begun to theorize the performance of visible differences as the locus of political agency because of its potential to deconstruct foundational categories of identity such as race, gender, and desire. While privileging visibility can



be politically and rhetorically effective, it is not without problems. Within the constructs of a given identity that invests certain signifiers with political value, figures that do not present those signifiers are often neglected. Because subjects who can "pass" exceed the categories of visibility that establish identity, they tend to be regarded as peripheral to the understanding of marginalization.<sup>3</sup>

For example, in Sedgwick's discussion of the closet as a trope for homosexual oppression, Eve Sedgwick uses racism to distinguish homophobia from prejudices that are based on visibility. Describing racism as being based on "a stigma that is visible," her analogy marginalizes people of color who don't fit paradigms of visibility by arguing that while those who can pass "are neither rare nor irrelevant" exceptions to the rule of visibility, they "delineate outlines rather than coloring the center of racial experience" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 75). The language of this passage implies that the "authentic" experience of marginalization is based on skin color and represents the passing figure as a blank "outline" drained of that sign of ethnic identity. Searching for comparison that operates on similarity rather than contrast, Sedgwick introduces the Jew as a more apt figure for homosexual oppression:

Ethnic/cultural/religious oppressions such as anti-Semitism are more analogous in that the stigmatized individual has at least notionally some discretion--although, importantly, it is

never to be taken for granted how much--over other people's knowledge of his or her membership in the group" (*Epistemology* 75).

Ironically, the logic of this analogy based on ethnic oppression operates on the very conditions of invisibility that exclude the figure who passes from the less favorable analogy based on racial oppression.

Sedgwick's analogies draw attention to how the issue of intentionality informs the politics of visibility. Often, passing (for straight, for white) is read as a conservative form of self-representation that the subject chooses in order to assume the privileges of the dominant identity, while the visible performance of difference (drag, mimicry that plays on "the not quite right" portrait of a dominant identity) is read as a radical form of self-representation. Carol-Anne Tyler problematizes the conflation of intentionality and self-representation in her critique of "the rehabilitation of camp" that has occurred with the influence of postmodern theories on feminist and gay and lesbian studies:

Whether revalued or devalued, camp and its interpretations participate in the reproduction of subjectivity and can be defensive as well as counter-offensive. That is, impersonators and their interpreters say more than they intend to because unconscious as well as conscious impulses motivate their performances, impulses all too often at odds with an acceptance of the radical lack to which all subjects are subject-ed. It is important to read each instance of drag (and its interpretations) symptomatically rather than to insist it is always radical or conservative. In whose eyes is what chic radical?" (33).

I would argue in a similar vein that each instance of "passing," or invisibility, needs to be read symptomatically. Is invisibility necessarily a defensive maneuver? Does the femme, for example, decide to style herself in such a way that she will not "look like a lesbian"?

My work sets itself up in contrast to the privileging of the visible by focusing on how the subject who is marked as other is defined in relation to the subject who "passes" as a figure of indeterminacy that destabilizes identities predicated on the visible in order to reveal how they are constructed. Because it began as a response to what Tyler refers to as the "reevaluation of camp," which reads the visible performance of difference as intrinsically radical, my work appears to set up invisibility and visibility as competing or oppositional discourses. However, the purpose of this study is not to adjudicate between the political and rhetorical effectiveness of either visibility or invisibility, but rather to trace how the two are mapped against each other in the construction of minority identities. I will analyze both the overlap and the space of contradiction between the two coexisting models to provide a more complete understanding of the way identity is constructed around in/visibility than would an analysis which focused exclusively on either the performance of the visible or on passing by themselves.

According to my primary identification as a lesbian and my assumption of white privilege, I initially took the femme (presumed to pass for straight) as the paradigmatic figure of exclusion from theory that privileged the butch. My interest in how issues of visibility and invisibility or passing resonate between the identities "lesbian" and "woman of color" comes about as a result of my observation that in theory by white critics, racial difference repeatedly underpins constructions of butch identity. This connection between figures of racial and sexual difference drew my attention to the need to theorize how racial difference, because it is assumed to express itself *prima facie* (at first sight) through skin color, often serves as a touchstone for playing out issues of in/visibility for other identities.

In locating issues of sexuality in relation to discourses about racial difference, critics tend to rely on assumptions about the visibility of racial difference that serve the purpose of analogy or contrast, neglecting to complicate discourses of race as they complicate discourses of gender/sexuality. What emerges repeatedly is an inability to question the construction of more than one difference at a time. Jane Gaines inscribes this phenomenon of shifting focus within the metaphors of in/visibility itself when she compares the structure of race in the film *Mahogany* to the mechanisms of optical illusion: "Racial

conflict surfaces or recedes in this film rather like the perceptual trick in which, depending on the angle of view, one swirling pattern or other pops out at the viewer" (207). According to Gaines, film viewers can choose to "inhabit 'looking' structures," but her metaphor also implies that various looking structures may be mutually exclusive, or that viewers can only inhabit one structure at a time. My own work reflects this problem of how to inhabit various looking structures at once, in that it has to shift back and forth between race and gender in its analysis of the visible. I try to mark the structural shifts in my argument to draw attention to the problem, and try to keep both race and gender in play as contested categories that are under question.

### **The Definitions**

Although discourses of visibility and invisibility are widely used among minorities to discuss the mechanisms of oppression, they are not often theorized as discourses or constructs, but rather are invoked to describe feelings about being marginalized.<sup>4</sup> Even theory that generates an analysis of in/visibility often shifts registers away from that analysis to a different set of terms. For example, Freudian and Lacanian analyses shift away from the field of perception of anatomical difference that inaugurates the Oedipus complex to a discussion of subject-constitution within the field of language/the Symbolic; in

"Interrogating Identity: The Postcolonial Prerogative," Homi Bhabha shifts from theorizing invisibility, the place from which the gaze is returned, as the locus of agency, to theorizing the written and aural, "the place from which the subject speaks or is spoken" (199); and in her analysis of the closet as a trope for homosexual oppression, Sedgwick shifts from field of visibility to field of knowledge (Epistemology 75-81). This hedginess about locating theory within the discourses of in/visibility may indicate the difficulties of working within its terms.

Regarding the systems of marking and visibility, the issue of terminology is complicated and charged. With respect to racial difference, the terms "marked" and "visible" would seem to be synonyms that signify the condition of being visibly different from what stands for the unmarked position of whiteness, where whiteness is not conceived as a racial category. In fact, Ellison uses the phrase "high visibility," to describe the condition of being marked by whites' projection of difference onto the racial other through the signifier of skin color. But the two terms belong to different sociolinguistic traditions; while both invoke issues of representation and power, the language of marking is current in feminist and cultural theories, while the language of visibility is in use within minority communities.

In their respective contexts, the terms take on different values. In its technical usages within feminist and cultural theories, the apparatus marked/unmarked designates how minority identities are constructed as marked while dominant identities are positioned as "the unmarked generic"--white, male, heterosexual.<sup>5</sup> For example, within Western ontology, whiteness, like masculinity, is the unmarked universal. Here, according to dominant social values, the term "marked" carries a negative value while the term "unmarked" carries a positive value. In its current usage within minority communities, on the other hand, the recent tendency has been to assign the condition of being marked, or "visible," a positive rather than a negative value; as the popularity of Afrocentric clothing and hairstyles in the African-American community and of "queer visibility" and "dyke visibility" buttons, stamps and bumper stickers in the lesbian and gay communities indicate, visibility is increasingly associated with empowerment and pride.

Similarly, the terms "unmarked" and "invisible" carry different values. Both terms suggest the unseen, but "unmarked" doesn't carry the sense of erasure implicit in the terms "invisible" and "unvisible" as Ellison uses them in *Invisible Man* and as minority communities continue to use them, because "unmarked" signifies the anonymity associated with privilege rather than the social and

political exclusion associated with marginalization.<sup>6</sup> The value attached to each term is opposite; while "unmarked" carries a positive value, "invisible" carries a negative value. Thus the title of the Black women's studies anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, which points to the exclusion, the invisibility of black women within a white and male dominated culture.<sup>7</sup>

One response to the confusing issue of terminology is to abandon one apparatus in favor of the other. But each set of terms has its advantages as a critical apparatus. In some ways, the visibility/invisibility trope is less sensitive to power relations than marked/unmarked because it doesn't indicate whether the condition of visibility is a function of self-representation or of attribution, whereas marked more clearly implies attribution. Further, because visible/invisible is in popular usage, the distinction between meta-language that critiques the visibility trope and object language that replicates the assumptions that this book wants to critique is not always clear. On the other hand, visible/invisible can account for the perception of cultural invisibility specific to the experience of marginalization in a way that marked/unmarked cannot. While visible/invisible is not as sensitive as marked/unmarked to external power-relations, it accommodates an analysis of the fluidity of power-relations



within the economy of the gaze and enables the theorization of agency for the oppressed within that economy

The difference between the apparatuses marked/unmarked and visible/invisible relates to what Gates terms the "critical double bind" raised in the arguments between Abdul JanMohamed and Homi Bhabha over their readings of Franz Fanon. Gates describes the critical stand-off between JanMohamed and Bhabha as follows:

You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism [Bhabha]; or play up the absolute nature of colonial domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonized, thus textually replicating the oppressive structures of colonialism [JanMohamed]. (463)

Likewise, the visibility/invisibility apparatus is open to charges of downplaying the "epistemic violence" or power relations that structure the representation of difference, while the marked/unmarked apparatus is open to charges of negating the subjectivity of the oppressed by ignoring distinctions between self-representation and attribution. But the critical double-bind is itself the result of either/or thinking. Perhaps more useful than abandoning one set of terms for the other is examining the relationship between the two.

For this reason, I have chosen to retain the terms visibility/invisibility, using them in conjunction with marked/unmarked in order to maintain the distinctions between what and how the two sets of terms signify. While

the critical impulse to avoid visibility and invisibility because of their "messiness" is understandable, I don't find that avoiding them solves the problems that they present, or that any other set of terms presents a viable alternative to them. Further, the impulse to avoid the terms seems to operate on the fantasy that there could be a set of politically neutral terms with which to discuss the issues under question. Unfortunately, other sets of terms seem either to replicate the problems inherent in the terms in/visibility, or because one set of terms does not map directly on the other, the substitute terms fail to account for the complexities specific to the set of terms visible/invisible.

Retaining the terms visibility/invisibility does necessitate some attempt to delineate their parameters. In order to accomplish this, I map out the economy of in/visibility in a way that risks being reductive of the complex relationship between external power and representation better accounted for by the terminology of marking in an attempt to address the shifts that occur within discourses of visibility. This mapping-out turns on mechanics of seeing and being seen that are often described in psychoanalytic terms, so I try to align the various arenas of in/visibility with the psychoanalytic functions that are invoked to describe them in theory and criticism, including fetishism, identification, and the mirror-stage.

The project is not, however, a systematic study of psychoanalysis. Rather, it draws on psychoanalysis as a metadiscourse about identity that can be used to explore identity-formation within economies of the visible; in turn, I draw on feminist and post-colonial theories of representation to suggest how the analysis of visibility and invisibility critiques specific psychoanalytic paradigms of subject-constitution that diagram the way identity is culturally understood.

### **The Texts**

This project reads across genres of fiction, literary criticism and theory to explore how visibility structures the concept of identity formation within those texts, and by extension, within the culture that produces them. In general, that culture is twentieth-century Western culture, although I make forays into the nineteenth-century to consider the historical development of twentieth-century paradigms of the visible. In the first four chapters, I read a series of novels that can be situated within the modern period. When I say that the novels are part of a modernist moment, I do not want to designate only literary modernism and its techniques of fragmentation, collage, and allusion. Some of the novels can be located within that tradition. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, although they were published after the period associated with literary modernism, clearly write

out of that moment; Ellison's style and range of allusions connect him with writers such as Joyce and Eliot, and Rhys's fiction reflects multiple-voiced, fragmented style of expatriate writers such as Ford, Stein, and Barnes with whom she was published in Ford's *Transatlantic Review*.<sup>8</sup> But that more traditional understanding of modernism might be hostile to some of the texts that this project studies, such as *The Well of Loneliness* and *Strange Brother*, which have been considered "failed" in the category of literariness because they are conventional, and sometimes sentimental, realist narratives.

When I say modernist, then, I refer primarily to modernism's anxiety around reconfigurations of sexual and racial identity after Freud and following the eras of Empire and American slavery.<sup>9</sup> These anxieties cut across boundaries of genre and are apparent in the writing and reception of texts that do not fall into the category of literary modernism. For example, in her essay on Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, the first novel that I read, Leigh Gilmore argues that Hall's conventional narrative form actually locates the novel within the historical tradition of what she terms "the modernist literary obscene" (623), in which the "medicalization of sexuality, the modernization of narrative, and the criminalization of printed material emerged as a constellation of cultural meanings related to identity" (604). Gilmore points out

that the very conventionality of the narrative through which Hall renders lesbianism visible as a sexual identity also makes her book visible as obscene, whereas Djuna Barnes's more stylized lesbian novel, *Nightwood*, published just eight years after Hall's, was received without controversy:

Hall's choice of narrative realism and her treatment of Stephen as a sexual invert clarified what the magistrate [who banned the book] wanted to 'see' in order for him to know obscenity when he saw it. Many of Barnes's readers did not 'see' the lesbianism of Nora and Robin because it was presented neither through a medical discourse nor in terms of narrative realism. Rather, the dynamic of visibility/invisibility in relation to sexuality and possible obscenity was perceived, in legal terms, through the category of the literary. The demonstrably shifting dynamics among sexuality, authorship, and law form the nexus within which obscenity operates as an identity discourse within modernism. (623)

Gilmore's analysis of how the dynamic of visibility/invisibility shapes the construction of obscenity as an "identity discourse within modernism" points to how modernism itself is characterized by a cultural intensity around the categories of visibility.

The first two chapters of the project attempt to set up the parameters of in/visibility with regard to sexual and racial differences in readings of two paradigmatic texts about visibility, Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, which produces the lesbian as visible in the figure of the butch, and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which explores the paradoxical notion that dark-skinned African-Americans'

"high visibility" actually renders them invisible, thus separating the concept of visibility from any literal referent and opening it to a metaphorical interpretation which reflects historical circumstance and political context. Hall's book, which virtually defined lesbianism for nearly forty years (from its publication in 1928 through the fifties and sixties), produces lesbianism as visible through the character of Stephen, the butch lesbian described as bearing "the mark of Cain." Hall owes her theory of sexual "inversion" to nineteenth-century sexologists Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, who were among the first to define the homosexual as a personage who could be typed physically (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 43). In adopting this medicalized definition of the homosexual, Hall's book registers a turn- of-the-century shift in the construction of homosexuality with relation to discourses of in/visibility. In this chapter, I argue that the butch lesbian's sexual visibility is based on the abjection of the feminine, so that it simultaneously desires and disavows the possibility of a feminine lesbian.

The pattern of desire and refusal that characterizes Hall's representation of the butch lesbian introduces the psychoanalytic schema of fetishism as a paradigm for the construction of identity with relation to the field of the visible--a schema that I explore more fully in Chapter Two through a reading of *Invisible Man*. I begin this chapter

with a discussion of how Ellison's concept of African American invisibility successfully critiques the fetishistic representation of difference. Then, by examining Ellison's representations of the white woman and the homosexual as fetishized figures for difference, I focus on how the critique of fetishism along one axis of difference does not preclude replicating the mechanism of fetishism along other axes of difference.

Chapter 3 reflects on the comparison between racial and sexual paradigms of visibility enacted by the structure of Chapters 1 and 2 through a reading of Blair Niles's 1931 novel *Strange Brother*. While Chapter 1 briefly addresses the function of racial difference within the construction of lesbian identity, and Chapter 2 more extensively explores the function of homosexuality within the construction of black male identity, for the most part, my analyses of *The Well of Loneliness* and *Invisible Man* treat race and sexuality separately. However, as I suggest at the end of Chapter 2, the positioning of these two introductory chapters in relation to each other in order to set the parameters of visibility and invisibility implies an analogy between race and sexual difference that itself requires analysis. *Strange Brother*, which self-consciously invokes that analogy to explore the connection between newly emerging homosexual and African American subcultures of Harlem in the 1920s, yields an analysis of how analogy

itself is structured around fetishism's enactment of both of the insistence on and the refusal of difference.

Chapter 4 argues that the pattern of identification is central to the way I analyze structures of visibility in the first three chapters. It focuses more specifically on the act of identification itself, and shifts attention from the moment when identification is refused, which characterizes the texts studied in the first three chapters, to the moment when identification is desired. I begin this chapter with a reading of Homi Bhabha's theory of the stereotype as a form of fetishism, and move into a reading of three novels, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*, which are interrelated in that each of the latter two novels rewrites the text(s) that precede it. My choice of texts here obviously departs from earlier selections. Whereas the previous chapters read novels that deal with marginalized racial and and sexual identities, I begin this chapter with a reading of *Jane Eyre*, a novel that has, until very recently, been celebrated for its representation of Jane's development as female individualist--in other words, her development as a white, heterosexual, middle-class subject.<sup>10</sup> One effect of including a canonical novel like *Jane Eyre* is to show how structures of visibility define issues of race and sexual identity in texts not explicitly about those issues.



Further, the chronology of this particular set of texts traces how issues of race and sexual difference emerge from *Jane Eyre* as a text in which those issues are barely apparent. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which deliberately foregrounds those issues, marks the moment when racial and sexual difference have come into cultural consciousness, but are unsettling to the extent that they cannot be as fully deconstructed as they will be in *Abeng*, which is written in the context of feminist and post-colonial critiques of unitary identity. In that *Wide Sargasso Sea* marks that moment of cultural discomfort with a new awareness of racial and sexual differences, it is linked to the modernist period in which I have located the texts discussed in previous chapters. Analyzing these three novels in relation to each other also allows me to trace how changing concepts of identity influence structures of visible. The chapter maps out the movement from a paradigm of consolidated identity in *Jane Eyre*, to a modernist conception of fragmented identity in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, to a post-modern conception of identity as multiple and heterogeneous in *Abeng*, arguing that as the novels increasingly explore the fantasy of identification, racial difference and lesbian sexuality are brought into the foreground to develop a critique of the relationship between identity-formation and visibility.

I conclude the project by analyzing the status of that relationship between identity-formation and visibility within current feminist criticism. The last chapter, "How to Recognize a Lesbian," is interested in how the construction of the identities "butch" and "woman of color" as visible leads to the displacement of those who do not "look like what they are" (women of color who can "pass" for white and femme lesbians who can "pass" for straight) from the communities feminism intends to represent. Reading the theoretical/autobiographical texts of Audre Lorde, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldua in connection with critical responses to those texts by both white feminists and feminists of color, the chapter argues that strategies of visibility are sometimes deconstructed, but also reinscribed to underpin the construction of lesbian identity within contemporary theories of race, gender and sexuality.

#### Notes

1. The definitions (theoretical and colloquial) of "butch" and "femme" are under question within the lesbian community and resist simple explanation. Joan Nestle describes both sexual styles as "a rich mixture of class, history, and personal integrity" in her essay "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s" from her *A Restricted Country* (108). A brief explanation of the terms might best refer to clothing, one of the most commonly read indicators of sexual style. Dress-codes identify butch women by their adaptations of typically "masculine" attire and femmes by their traditionally "feminine" attire. The point often made about femmes (one that will be taken up in this essay) is that they, unlike butches, are indistinguishable from straight women in their sexual style.

2. I use the term "gender/sexual identity" for lack of a better one to describe the intersection of gender identity and sexual orientation that defines lesbian and gay awareness of our own identities within the framework of compulsory heterosexuality. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990, 6-7) talks about the relationship between the categories "sex, gender, and desire," using "desire" to address the issue of sexual orientation. This is a useful addition to the usual catechism of the "sex/gender system." However, it does not meet my needs for a term that is parallel in grammatical usage to the term "gender identity." Further, it will become apparent that I find the term "desire" to be problematic in Butler's discussion of lesbian identity. I prefer "gender/sexual identity" as a phrase which complicates the concept of gender identity while maintaining the sense of identities as constructions.

3. See Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* for another discussion of the limitations of visibility politics with regard to passing (6-11).

4. For example, see Michele Wallace *Invisibility Blues*; the special issue of *Empathy* 2:2 (1990-91) on Visibility and Invisibility; Jeffrey Escoffier's "The Politics of Gay Identity" (145); Evelyn Torton Beck, "The Politics of Jewish Invisibility,"; Jewelle Gomez, "Imagine a Lesbian . . . A Black Lesbian."

5. Using sexual difference as her paradigm, Peggy Phelan explains how, within the system of marking, marks of value are transformed into marks of difference that leave the dominant position unmarked:

As Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction have demonstrated, the epistemological, psychic, and political binaries of Western metaphysics create distinctions and evaluations across two terms. One term of the binary is marked with value, the other is unmarked. The male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning. Within this psycho-philosophical frame, cultural reproduction takes she who is unmarked and re-marks her, rhetorically and imaginistically, while he who is marked with value is left unremarked, in discursive paradigms and visual fields. He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks.  
(5)

6. In his article "Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in the Black Literary Tradition," Todd M. Lieber remarks that Ellison's novel most fully articulates a metaphor that has long been used by black writers to describe "an existence that society refuses to recognize, an identity for which there is no place in society's definitions of reality, truth, and history, and to which, consequently, society is blind" (87). I would add that the metaphor of invisibility is part of a social as well as a literary tradition.

7. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982). Providing readings and resources in Black women's studies, the book positions itself in response to the exclusion of Black women from African-American Studies, which has focused primarily on male history, and from women's studies, which has been concerned primarily with white women, drawing attention to the double oppression of black women in a racist and sexist culture.

8. On Ellison's connections to Modernism, see Robert List's *Dedalus in Harlem*, Berndt Ostendorf's, "Ralph Waldo Ellison: Anthropology, Modernism, and Jazz," and Alan Nadel's *Invisible Criticism* (24-26). On Rhys as a modernist writer, see Coral Ann Howells's *Jean Rhys* (24-28). Howell argues that the modernist identity crisis is related, for Rhys, to her position as a post-colonial writer:

Historically, Rhys belongs to the period of Empire and her own formation as a white Creole is a distinctly colonial one; yet her subversive critique of Englishness and imperialism . . . should more appropriately be described as a post-colonial impulse. (20)

9. One model for a broadened definition of modernism based on historical changes in structures of identity is Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, which marks the commencement of "Afro-American modernism" on September 18, 1895, with Booker T. Washington's opening address at the Negro exhibit of the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition. Baker argues that Washington's speech set a new direction "for a mass of black citizens who had struggled through the thirty years since emancipation" (15). Historians such as Michel Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks have argued in a similar vein that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked the advent of new sexual identities defining the lesbian and the homosexual as personages. Thus, the period of the early to mid-twentieth century is a period when

changing racial and sexual identities were very much at the forefront of cultural consciousness.

10. Elaine Showalter (1977) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) helped to establish *Jane Eyre* as a central text of feminist criticism. See Firdous Azim for an analysis of how the critical reception of *Jane Eyre* traces feminism's changing concerns surrounding subject-constitution.

## Chapter 1

### Martyred Butches and Impossible Femmes: Radclyffe Hall and the Construction of Lesbian Identity

"But then, of course, all intelligent people  
realized she was a creature apart" . . . .  
Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*

This chapter studies the permutations of in/visibility within the changing discourses on homosexuality at the turn of the century, specifically as they are represented in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. It considers how the medical discourses that *The Well* invokes figure into the construction of lesbian identities for characters that would now be recognized as butch and femme.<sup>1</sup> *The Well* is heavily informed by late nineteenth-century medicalized definitions of "inversion," as is indicated in the introductory note by Havelock Ellis that authorizes the novel on the basis of its "notable psychological and sociological significance," and by the novel's references to Richard von Krafft-Ebbing and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs.

I argue that in *The Well* and in the sexological discourses that inform it, the conflation of gender "inversion," or cross-gender identification, with same-sex desire defines the lesbian as butch on the basis of her visible gender transgression and renders the femme invisible (outside the economy of lesbianism) on the basis of her apparent gender coherence. While the novel so vividly portrays Stephen Gordon, *The Well*'s butch

protagonist, that she has become a literary prototype for the lesbian,<sup>2</sup> it struggles to represent the feminine lesbian; both of Stephen's lovers, Angela Crossby and Mary Llewelyn, are portrayed as wayward heterosexuals, "normal" women capable of being attracted to lesbians but not capable of making it "in the life."

Criticism of *The Well* has drawn attention to the fact that by invoking medical discourses in its plea for tolerance of homosexuals, the novel must subject itself to the terms of that discourse, and so participates in its own marginalization by deploying heterosexist and misogynist theories of lesbianism.<sup>3</sup> Turn of the century medical discourses on homosexuality were predicated on identifying anatomical marks of homosexual difference, and *The Well* accordingly tries to set up its definition of lesbianism with reference to marked and unmarked bodies. But it also resists those discourses of marking by encoding breakdowns that are pivotal to unraveling the complicated relationship between the medical gaze and the construction of lesbian identity by a lesbian writer.<sup>4</sup>

Both in the medical discourses and in the novel, those breakdowns often occur around the femme as a figure that cannot be imagined within paradigms of homosexuality that privilege the marked body. In representations of the butch, the systems of marking and visibility reinforce each other: because she is marked as sexual other, she is visible as a

lesbian. Attempts to represent the femme, on the other hand, produce a collapse in logic at the intersection between systems of marking and systems of visibility. Because the femme is unmarked as sexual other, she cannot be visible as a lesbian; but because she is a lesbian, she must be marked, even if she is not visible as a lesbian.

### **Historical Background: Sexology's System of Marking**

Historians of sexuality have argued that the concept of homosexuality as an identity rather than a sexual act was produced at the turn of the century, when medical discourses on sexuality became increasingly concerned with categorizing and explaining "deviant" sexualities. Before that time, homosexual relations were thought of as localized instances of unnatural sexual behavior to which anyone might be susceptible, especially given the right circumstances. In early theories of same-sex relations, engaging in homosexual practices did not designate a distinct sexual identity, but was construed as a lapse into sinfulness or perversion (Foucault 43).<sup>5</sup> During the late nineteenth century, sexologists such as Ellis and Krafft-Ebbing revised explanations of homosexuality based on moral principles, although moral judgments surface in the language of "degenerescence" that characterizes their theory and case studies. But by classifying homosexuals as a "type" and speculating about the biological or "congenital" origins of sexual deviance, physicians and



psychologists did attempt to make a case for tolerating homosexuality on the basis that it was a disease rather than a choice. Sexology encoded changing conceptions of same-sex desire in its very terminology. For example, in attempting to refine the nomenclature for scientific purposes, Ellis makes a distinction between **homosexuality**, defined as an act "which includes all sexual attractions between persons of the same sex, even when seemingly due to the accidental absence of the natural objects of sexual attraction" and **sexual inversion**, defined as a condition in which "sexual instinct [is] turned by inborn constitutional abnormality toward persons of the same sex" (1).

The latter was of special scientific interest because biologizing sexual deviance enabled the medical community to produce homosexual difference as marked on the body. In Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality I*, which like his earlier work questions the privileging of vision in the construction of the traditional human subject,<sup>6</sup> Foucault explains the historical imperative to perceive the homosexual body as marked:

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. (43)

But sexology is often unclear about exactly how this secret comes to be written on the body. While most studies seem to agree that homosexuality has physiological sources because "psychological forces are insufficient to explain manifestations of so thoroughly degenerated a character" (Krafft-Ebbing 340), they contradict themselves about whether or not lesbianism reveals itself through biological anomalies, such as the presence of secondary sexual characteristics of the opposite sex or abnormal genitalia. Ellis, for example, first suggests that "while inverted women frequently, though not always, convey an impression of mannishness or boyishness, there are no invariable anatomical characteristics associated with this impression. There is, for instance, no uniform tendency to a masculine distribution of hair" (251). Two pages later, however, he says that "there seems little doubt that inverted women frequently tend to show minor anomalies of the piliferous system, and especially slight hypertrichosis and a masculine distribution of hair" (253). Other masculine traits of lesbians include "a certain [unfeminine] tonicity of the muscles," "a masculine type of larynx," and "arrested development and infantilism" of the sexual organs (255-256).

These studies are also ambivalent about whether gender-digressive dressing marks lesbianism as an extension of the already masculinized body, or as a superimposition

of masculine identification onto the feminine body. In Krafft-Ebbing's description of case number 165, for example, the medical gaze shifts between what might be termed figure (the masculine attire and mannerism) and ground (the female body) so that the object of study is perceived as both a man in women's clothes and a woman in men's clothes:

Even at the first meeting, the patient produced a remarkable impression by reason of her attire, features, and conduct. She wore a gentleman's hat, her hair closely cut, eye-glasses, a gentleman's cravat, a coat-like outer garment of masculine cut that reached well down over her gown, and boots with high heels. She had coarse, somewhat masculine features; a harsh, deep voice; and made rather the impression of a man in female attire than of a lady, if one but overlooked the bosom and the decidedly feminine form of the pelvis. (426)

Having described her attire as masculine, the doctor concludes that she looks like a man in woman's clothes. But rather than acknowledge that the difficulty of interpreting figure/ground discrepancies (which gender is ground and which is figure?) points to the instability of gender categories themselves, the medical gaze persists in trying to typologize its subjects into consistent and thorough categories.

This effort to typologize is further complicated by the "feminine invert." The medical literature accounts for the "womanly" woman's involvement in lesbian relationships by designating her behavior, but not her identity, as homosexual. Krafft-Ebbing, for example, explains the femme

by making a distinction between homosexual behavior and "antipathic sexual instinct" (my emphasis):

I cannot lay sufficient stress upon the fact that sexual acts between persons of the same sex do not necessarily constitute antipathic sexual instinct. The latter exists only when the physical and psychical secondary characteristics of the same sex exert an attracting influence over the individual and produce in him or her the impulse to sexual acts. (396)

Krafft-Ebbing implies that the feminine lesbian is drawn to the masculine qualities of inverts, so that while she might engage in sexual behaviors with members of the same sex, the trajectory of her desire is heterosexual, because it is the characteristics of the opposite sex that attract her. Another strategy for explaining the femme was to downplay her sexual agency, casting her in the passive role of the undesiring but receptive female who will settle for a butch when she can't get a man. Underlying this theory is the assumption is that sexual desire itself is masculine, so that while feminine women may participate in sexual acts, it is as the object rather than the subject of desire. Ellis's often-quoted analysis of the feminine lesbian, in which he attributes the "womanly" lesbian's sexual deviance to her less than ideal feminine qualities (not that she is masculine, just unattractive), emphasizes the femme's passivity through the language of marking to reinscribe her within the system that she problematizes:

A class in which homosexuality, while fairly distinct, is only slightly marked, is formed by the women to whom the actively inverted woman is

most attracted. These women differ, in the first place, from the normal, or average, woman, in that they are not repelled or disgusted by lover-like advances from persons of their own sex. They are not usually attractive to the average man, though to this rule there are many exceptions. Their faces may be plain or ill-made, but not seldom they possess good figures: a point which is apt to carry more weight with the inverted woman than beauty of face. Their sexual impulses are seldom well marked, but they are of strongly affectionate nature. On the whole, they are women who are not very robust and well-developed, physically or nervously, and who are not well adapted for child-bearing, but who still possess many excellent qualities, and they are always womanly. One may, perhaps, say that they are the pick of the women whom the average man would pass by. No doubt, this is often the reason why they are open to homosexual advances, but I do not think it is the sole reason. So far as they may be said to constitute a class, they seem to possess a genuine, though not precisely sexual, preference for women over men, and it is this coldness, rather than lack of charm, which often renders men indifferent to them. (222, my emphases)

The syntax of the passage, which introduces an idea only to revise it with a "but" or a "though," and which uses opposing sets of terms to describe the femme, emphasizes the ambiguity and contradiction around the figure of the femme. The femme's homosexual difference must be "distinct" in order to preserve the category of heterosexuality, and yet her sexuality is "not well marked" because she doesn't present the figure/ground discrepancy that signifies lesbianism within the system of marking. Finally, the problem of the femme is not solved but evaded by representing her as the runt of the litter of heterosexual women--physically underdeveloped, high strung, and plain in

the face. Commenting on this passage in Ellis, Esther Newton remarks that "No mention is made of 'congenital' factors in regard to this 'womanly' invert, and like most examples that do not fit pet paradigms, she is dropped" (288).

**"'And the Lord set a mark upon Cain. . . .': Reading Butch Identity in *The Well of Loneliness***

*The Well* inscribes both the medical gaze's system of classification and the breakdown of that system when the lesbian body confounds established systems of representation. In its deployment of medical theories on inversion, the novel affirms the sexologists' definition of the lesbian as a "man trapped in a woman's body." All of the "true inverts" in Hall's novel (the untrue ones are femmes) bear what Stephen terms "the mark of Cain"; here, the biblical metaphor for monstrosity refers to the butch's outward manifestation of her core or interior masculine gender identity.<sup>7</sup> This manifestation may be subtle, as in "the timbre of a voice, the build of an ankle, the texture of a hand, a movement, a gesture" (Hall 352-53), or it may be more pronounced, as in Stephen's case, where her body and her clothing preferences are notably masculine from the beginning of the novel. Referring to the description of Stephen as a "narrow-hipped, wide-shouldered little tadpole of a baby," Newton says that "even newborn, Stephen's body achieves a biologically impossible masculinity" (289). As Stephen grows up, her likeness to her father is emphasized,

especially in attention to masculine features such as the strong jaw, the cleft chin, the heavy eyebrows, and the large, unfeminine nature of her movements.

The novel also emphasizes Stephen's masculine identification. As a child she dresses up as young Lord Nelson, like the picture in her nursery, and pretends to be a boy; she hates "soft dresses and sashes, and ribbons, and small coral beads, and openwork stockings" (20). She is jealous of her neighbor's son, Roger Antrim, who represents the male privilege to which Stephen is barred access. At ten, he is "already full to the neck of male arrogance" and Stephen envies

his thick, clumping boots, his cropped hair and his Etons . . . his masculine companions of whom he would speak grandly . . . his right to climb trees and play cricket and football--his right to be perfectly natural [and] above all . . . his splendid conviction that being a boy constituted a privilege in life. (46-47)

Further, Stephen detests Roger's sister Violet, who is held up to her as a model of feminine deportment, and represents everything that Stephen despises about femininity: vanity, artifice, and weakness. At age seven Violet is "vain of her appearance," taking pleasure in her curls and ribbons and silk frocks, and "full of feminine poses: she loved dolls, but not quite so much as she pretended" (50; 47).

As an adult, Stephen maintains her masculine identification by wearing men's suits, ties and shoes, short hair, and a shrapnel scar on her face (it functions

as an accessory) that she acquired driving ambulances during the war--the closest to fighting on the front lines that a woman could get. Stephen's masculinity is coded as noble, and almost natural; the shrapnel scar blurs the distinction between body and costume, recalling Krafft-Ebbing's confused description of case number 165, in which he cannot determine whether it is "nature" or "culture" or both that makes his client look mannish.

While the novel works within the parameters of the medical gaze by representing the lesbian body as marked, it also represents the medical gaze's confusion about how to read the body. In an early passage in which Stephen's father studies his textbooks on medical deviance, pausing occasionally to gaze at a portrait of his family, this confusion is described as an affliction of the eyes, a problem of perception:

The author was a German, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, and reading, Sir Phillip's eyes would grow puzzled; then groping for a pencil he would make little notes all along the immaculate margins. Sometimes he would jump up and pace the room quickly, pausing now and again to stare at a picture--a portrait of Stephen painted with her mother, by Millais, the previous year. He would notice the gracious beauty of Anna, so perfect a thing, so completely reassuring and then that indefinable quality in Stephen that made her look wrong in the clothes she was wearing, as though she and they had no right to each other, but above all no right to Anna. (26-27)

This passage introduces the economy of visibility simultaneously with a failure in the system of marking; Stephen's difference, which the novel has painstakingly



inscribed on her body to render her visible as an invert, is suddenly "indefinable," not well marked. Sir Phillip cannot identify Stephen's masculinity as such, but only a vague "wrongness" about her appearance that is evident in contrast to Anna's reassuringly "right" presentation of femininity. The location of Stephen's difference moves from her body to Sir Phillip's eye, complicating the system of marking by implicating the viewer in the process of that marking. What Sir Phillip reads of Stephen (inversion) in his books that blinds him (he gropes for his pencil)<sup>8</sup> is written onto her body in the portrait; and what he sees in the portrait (difference) he writes in the margins of his books to corroborate their narratives of homosexuality and his interpretation of Stephen. The book and the portrait refer to each other so that seeing, reading and writing all become parts of the same economy--an economy that reveals the constructedness of gender.<sup>9</sup>

Stephen later discovers her father's books in a scene that reifies medical discourse's vision of the lesbian, but also turns the production of knowledge over to her by defining her as an artist. Although portraying Stephen as an artist is in keeping with medical theories of homosexuality,<sup>10</sup> her possession of a vision that supersedes the medical gaze because it comes from within (insight) suggests a certain resistance to the totalizing sweep of that gaze. Stephen discovers the textbooks after

her father's death and, examining them, finds "notes in her father's small, scholarly hand and she [sees] that her own name appear[s] in those notes" (204). She then realizes that her father possessed the knowledge that she was "maimed, hideously maimed and ugly" and kept it from her out of pity. The patriarchal order unfolds in front of Stephen as her father's knowledge becomes God's knowledge: "And then, before she knew what she was doing, she had found her father's old, well-worn Bible. There she stood demanding a sign from heaven. . . . The Bible fell open near the beginning. She read: 'And the Lord set a mark upon Cain. . . .'" (204-205).

At this point, however, the novel presents another form of discursive power that rests with the invert herself. Stephen's mentor/governess, a closeted and "old-maid" style lesbian aptly nicknamed "Puddle" for her drabness, finds Stephen mourning her fate and urges her to become the brilliant writer that Puddle knows her to be: "'You've got work to do--come and do it! Why, just because you are what you are, you may actually find that you've got an advantage. You may write with a curious double insight--write both men and women from a personal knowledge'" (205). While the sexologists often characterize the invert as sensitive (perhaps high-strung would be more accurate) and gifted artistically, they do not see this as authorizing homosexuals to theorize their own experience in defining

themselves; diagnosis, while it may draw on the personal narratives of the "patient" for evidence, is always performed by the doctor. Stephen's mission is to claim that authority, a mission which the novel itself attempts but cannot fully achieve.

The novel suggests that the barrier to claiming that authority is the body itself. In the description of Stephen's alienation from her own body, desire and writing are linked in a way that seems to anticipate Helene Cixous' formulation of writing as a realization of the "decensored relation of woman to her sexuality" (Medusa 250). Stephen will be unable to write her defense of the invert because her relation to her sexuality is censored by the binary system of sexualized opposition. In her agonized scrutiny of her body in the mirror, she imagines literalizing the violence that the binary enacts on a body that represents the blurring of the masculine and the feminine (muscles becomes breasts and curves become lines) and signifies deviant sexual desires:

she hated her body with its muscular shoulders, its small compact breasts, its slender flanks of an athlete. All her life she must drag this body of hers like a monstrous fetter imposed on her spirit. This strangely ardent yet sterile body that must worship yet never be worshipped in return by the creature of its adoration. She longed to maim it, for it made her feel cruel; it was so white, so strong and so self-sufficient; yet withal so poor and unhappy a thing that her eyes filled with tears and her hate turned to pity. She began to grieve over it, touching her breasts with pitiful fingers, stroking her shoulders, letting her hands slip along her straight thighs--Oh, poor and most desolate body! (186-87)

While violence shifts to a kind of autoeroticism toward the end of the passage where Stephen caresses herself, this is not the autoeroticism of Cixous' *jouissance*.<sup>11</sup> Stephen's body is, she imagines "never to be indulged . . . always repressed until it grows strong much than my spirit because of this unnatural repression." Therefore, she reasons "I shall never be a great writer because of my maimed and insufferable body . . . . true genius in chains, in the chains of flesh, a fine spirit subject to physical bondage" (217-18).

The novel attempts to overcome Stephen's sense of her body as maimed, but can do so only within the terms of the binary which privileges masculine over feminine, by reifying the construction of masculinity as natural and femininity as unnatural. As Stephen grows up, her difference from other girls is, in keeping with her characterization as a male-identified invert, repeatedly constructed around her discomfort with the female body, as the following scene that describes Stephen's inability to socialize with "other girls" at a garden party:

With other young girls she had nothing in common, while they, in their turn, found her irritating. She was shy to primness regarding certain subjects, and would actually blush if they happened to be mentioned. This would strike her companions as queer and absurd--after all, between girls--surely everyone knew that at times one ought not get ones feet wet, that one didn't play games, not at certain times--there was nothing to make all this fuss about surely! To see Stephen Gordon's expression of horror of one so much as threw out a hint on the subject, was to

feel that the thing must in some way be shameful, a kind of disgrace, a humiliation! (75-76)

Here, Stephen's disgust for the feminine, signified by menstruation, is based on shame about the female body that she inhabits but does not identify with. In one reading, this passage seems to construct the feminine body as natural in order to heighten the visibility of Stephen's unnatural masculinity--her discomfort with the "natural" function of menstruation is itself "queer."<sup>12</sup> But Stephen's discomfort evokes a certain misogyny that goes beyond her psychological sense of gender displacement. The novel's construction of Stephen as invert makes her physically other than female; she is like a woman but not exactly a woman, and she abjects femininity. So in an alternative reading, the passage emphasizes the artifice that surrounds even the most natural manifestations of the feminine; the girls are portrayed as silly and weak in their acceptance of myths about menstruation, and it is Stephen's rejection of their feminine sensibilities that make them feel ashamed.

The shifting designation of what counts as natural is part of a dialectic of desire and repulsion that takes place around the difference between the masculine body of the invert and the feminine body of the "pure woman." The prototypical feminine body is the maternal body, which Stephen is "of" but not "like." Anna, whose gender identity is reassuringly unified, has "that in her body that

betokened happy promise--the archetype of the very perfect women, whom creating God has found good" (11). Stephen's difference, her gender incoherence, causes Anna to reject her daughter: "there were times when the child's soft flesh would be almost distasteful to her; when she hated the way Stephen moved or stood still, hated a certain largeness about her, a certain crude lack of grace in her movements" (16). Stephen longs for the approval of "this woman within whose most gracious and perfect body her own anxious body had lain and quickened"; looking at her mother, "a sense of great loss would descend upon her, together with a sense of not fully understanding just what she had lost or why she had lost it--she would stare at Anna as a thirsty traveller in the desert will stare at a mirage of water" (162).

In connection with this desire for the mother, the feminine body is reconstructed as natural. Stephen's expression of disgust with the "other girls" at the garden party thus shifts to an expression of longing in terms that evoke the mother/child relationship:

While despising these girls, she yet longed to be like them--yes, indeed, at such moments she longed to be like them. It would suddenly strike her that they seemed very happy, very sure of themselves as they gossiped together. There was something so secure in their feminine conclaves, a secure sense of oneness, of mutual understanding; each in turn understood the other's ambitions. (76)

Here, the language of "conclaves" and "oneness" evokes imagery of the child in the womb. The maternal body,

however, is the one that Stephen has no right to, as Sir Phillip suggests when he looks at the portrait of his wife and child. Because the system of compulsory heterosexuality refuses Stephen the maternal/feminine body as an object of desire, the novel cannot imagine a feminine woman that Stephen does have a right to, and so it repeatedly underscores both Stephen's exclusion from the realm of the "purely" feminine and the exclusion of the feminine from the realm of the female invert.

Because the novel's paradigm for sexual inversion is the male-identified woman, who affirms masculinity, its construction of homosexual identity based on the exclusion of the feminine is perhaps most obvious in its representation of Stephen's opposite: the queen, embodied by Jonathan Brockett, a gay man who adopts Stephen when her mother exiles her from the family estate.<sup>13</sup> On Brockett, the figure/ground disjunction that makes Stephen seem martyred and heroic evokes disgust, because it foregrounds femininity:

Stephen was never able to decide whether Jonathan Brockett attracted or repelled her. Brilliant he could be at certain times, yet curiously foolish and puerile at others; and his hands were as white and soft as a woman's--she would feel a queer little sense of outrage creeping over her when she looked at his hands. For those hands of his went so ill with him somehow. (226)

As a symbol of effeminacy, the hands recur as a trope for the abjection of the feminine that consolidates Stephen's masculine identification.<sup>14</sup>

The consolidation of the butch's masculine identity through opposition to the feminine is made explicit when that masculine identity breaks down at the end of the novel. In the strange vision in which Stephen recognizes her calling as the spiritual mother and defender of the oppressed invert, the hands accuse her of using them to strengthen her masculine position and then refusing them:

And these terrible ones started pointing at her with their shaking, white-skinned, effeminate fingers: 'You and your kind have stolen our birthright; you have taken our strength and have given us your weakness!' They were pointing at her with white, shaking fingers. . . . 'You dare not disown us!' (436-37)

The boundary between masculine and feminine seems to blur as the effeminate outcasts reclaim Stephen by possessing her womb, reinscribing her masculinized body within the realm of the feminine/maternal. This apparent moment of union does not resolve but sustains the tension between the natural and the unnatural that consistently characterizes the relation between masculine and feminine, and homosexual and heterosexual in *The Well*. Stephen's body is both fruitful and sterile; she is both mother and monster: "Her barren womb became fruitful--it ached with its fearful and sterile burden" (437). Here, the dialectic of desire and repulsion still circulates around the difference between the masculine body of the female invert and the feminine/maternal body.



**"'In her very normality lay her danger'": Femme  
In/visibility**

The exclusion of the feminine from the realm of the invert that shapes *The Well's* phobic representation of the queen is also evident in the novel's struggle to represent the feminine lesbian, a struggle that can be traced in its portrayals of Stephen's lovers. They are coded traditionally as either the "wifely partner," with a woman's "clinging dependence" (395) and a burning desire to darn socks, and/or as the wayward heterosexual who returns to men when "the life" becomes too difficult (when the going gets tough, the femmes go straight).<sup>15</sup> Stephen's two lovers represent the figures of the good femme and the bad femme, but in both cases it is their "womanliness," their visible conformity to feminine ideals of appearance and behavior, that makes them essentially heterosexual in the novel's terms, and causes them to betray Stephen. Further, the novel is ambivalent in its representation of one character who is both lesbian and feminine, Valerie Seymour.

Because the femme does not present the figure/ground discrepancy that the novel has established as the mark of lesbianism, there is a temptation to read the femme as unmarked that is encouraged by a certain lack of substance in the representation of Mary, Stephen's main love interest. Newton attributes the sense of absence in the

representation of Mary to the novel's inability to imagine the femme:

Though Mary, in effect, seduced Stephen, Hall calls her 'normal,' that is, heterosexual. Even Havelock Ellis gave the 'womanly' lesbian more dignity and definition. As a character, Mary is forgettable and inconsistent . . . . Despite knowing Una [Troubridge, Hall's longtime femme lover], Natalie Barney [a femme poet] and others like them, Hall was unable to publicly articulate--perhaps to believe in--the persona of a real lesbian who did not feel somehow male. If sexual desire is masculine, and if the feminine woman only wants to attract men, then the womanly lesbian cannot logically exist. Mary's real story had yet to be told. (292-93)

Newton's commentary sums up the paradox and the dilemma of the femme in both *The Well* and in the medical discourses that inform it. The femme's desire is both present--she seduces--and not present--she merely responds to being the object of masculine desire, the more masculine, the better. The lesbian femme exists but is not recognizable as lesbian.

But invisible is not the same as unmarked, and in fact the femme can be read as being marked by the very signifier of her invisibility: whiteness. The repeated association of femininity with whiteness at once reinforces the temptation to read the femme as unmarked and marks her difference from the "real lesbian." Whiteness, usually constructed as racially unmarked, becomes a trope for racial difference in the novel when its visibility is heightened in order to intimate its opposite: the darkness and corruption associated with the racial other. Thus whiteness can

signify the idealized qualities of innocence, purity, and naturalness on the one hand, and of corruption, impurity, and artificiality on the other. It functions as what might be termed an "invisible sign" of the femme's otherness that sets up a tension between the economies of marking and visibility by signifying the femme's indiscernibility.

All the femme characters are associated with whiteness or paleness, which signifies different qualities in each. Mary has "the pale and rather triangular face . . . of someone who was still very young." In Mary, paleness signifies youth, innocence and the feminine/maternal purity associated with Stephen's mother, Anna--a purity recalled by Mary's Celtic lineage, which she shares with Anna, and by her namesake, the Virgin Mary. But whiteness/femininity is also associated with a fragility that leads to betrayal; both Anna and Mary reject Stephen because they require the shelter of social convention that Stephen cannot provide.

The double valence of whiteness is most explicit in Angela, where it signifies not only fragility but duplicity, for Stephen misreads the signifiers of artifice as the signifiers of purity. In a passage structured by negatives, Angela is described as "amazingly blonde, her hair was not so much golden as silver. . . . Her skin was very white, and Stephen decided that this woman would never have a great deal of colour, nor would her rather wide mouth be red, it would always remain the tint of pale

coral" (131). Angela is also likened to "some queer flower that had grown up in darkness, like some rare, pale flower without blemish or stain" (132), but her lily-white surface at once conceals and marks her corrupt personality. Stephen buys Angela a pearl, symbol of purity, from the same jeweler who sold her father stones pure enough to touch his wife's finger, but Angela is not of Anna's good breeding--she is a cave flower or a hothouse flower, not a healthy English flower, and her whiteness marks not her purity but her bloodless, reptilian nature. She diverts herself from the boredom of marriage her marriage to a nagging, impotent man by pretending to love Stephen when she has no intentions of giving up the social privileges of heterosexuality.

The novel accounts for Angela's sexual duplicity by rendering it a function of her "checkered" past: her mother was "the descendant of women who had owned many slaves to minister to their most trivial requirements [and who could] hardly put on [their] own stockings and shoes" (178). Here the function of whiteness as a mark of otherness is made obvious in the connection between whiteness and blackness. This relationship of contiguity places Angela's exoticism in the context of racial difference; her whiteness is both heightened and "tainted" by association with black slaves as figures for illicit sexuality. Discourses about sexual promiscuity and race intertwine as Angela manifests her

mother's legacy in her own history of prostitution and in her ultimate betrayal of Stephen--she two-times her by having an affair with Roger Antrim and then tells Anna Gordon that Stephen has made homosexual advances to her, precipitating Stephen's exile from Morton, the Gordon family estate.

The establishment of Angela's degeneracy through association with exotic flowers and slaves draws on imperialist tropes of creolization, which constructed Anglo women living in the colonies as both white and non-white. Creolization developed out of the historical association of white West Indians with the islands' slave population. The Creoles were thought to have the advantage of a British ancestry, but their long residence in the tropics and among natives marked them as different from the Englishman. Edward Long elucidates the idea that the Creoles had degenerated from their original state of purity/whiteness through contact with blacks in his 1774 *History of Jamaica*. In his consideration of the Creole, he goes so far as to suggest that whites might be infected, physically and temperamentally, through the exchange of bodily fluids with slaves; accordingly, he was strongly against the practice of engaging "Negro or Mulatto wet nurses." His defense of this position clearly figures the black woman as an icon for sexual deviance:

Notwithstanding every precaution to examine the nurse of their choice, it is a million to one but

she harbours in her blood the seeds of many terrible distempers. There is scarcely one of these nurses who is not a common prostitute; or who has not some commerce with more than one man; or who has not some latent taint of venereal distemper, or *scrofa*, either hereditary, or acquired, and ill-cured . . . . The mothers in England are at least able to find some healthy labourer's wife; and none of them, I venture to believe, would send their infants to be suckled in any of the brothels of London. (276-277)

This image of the Creole as marked by sexual and racial degeneracy through contact with slaves is offset in writings of the same period by images of the extreme whiteness of Creole women, rendered for example in Richard Madden's travel literature through flower metaphors that resonate with Hall's description of Angela:

If you were one of those horticultural amateurs of beautiful flowers who look for loveliness in the fragile forms, the blanched and almost sickly foliage of the delicate rosetrees that have been transplanted from the genial garden of England into the scorching parterre of a West Indian Hesperides,-- I would send you a drawing of a young Creole widow . . . . Bryan Edwards very truly observes . . . . 'no women on earth make better wives or better mothers.' (81-82)

Here the pale and fragile flower is associated with sexual virtuousness, but the metaphors of disease and withering recall Long's anxieties about how the Creole woman's purity is contaminated by her association with slaves. While the texts quoted above precede Hall's work by more than a century, the parallels between how certain figures carry signs of both whiteness and blackness, purity and degeneracy, indicate how the tropes of Creolization carried through in the imperialist imagination.<sup>16</sup>

*The Well* "recasts" the construction of whiteness as a mark of the femme's otherness through the discourses of Orientalism in its representation of Valerie Seymour, a femme character modeled after Natalie Barney:

She was not beautiful nor was she imposing, but her limbs were very beautifully proportioned, which gave her a fictitious look of tallness. She moved well, with the quiet and unconscious grace that sprang from those perfect proportions. Her face was humorous, placid, and worldly; her eyes very kind, very blue, very lustrous. She was dressed all in white, and a large white fox skin was clasped round her slender and shapely shoulders. For the rest she had masses of thick fair hair, which was busily ridding itself of its hairpins. (223-24)

Not only is she draped in furs and white gowns, but she wears an oriental fragrance that mingles "with the odour of tuberose [white blossoms] in a sixteenth century chalice," and on her divan is a box of Fuller's peppermint creams. The details conjure up an image of Valerie stretched out on the couch eating bonbons and sniffing flowers with her hair tumbling down and her fox sliding from her shapely shoulders. Here the sensuous decadence of the Oriental is linked to homosexuality in the tradition of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, which captures the association of leisured idleness and aestheticism with same-sex passion for which Wilde would become infamous.<sup>17</sup>

The novel invokes this kind of white Orientalism in order to mark Valerie as an unsafe object of sexual desire. In many ways Valerie is the obvious solution to Stephen's tormented relationships with heterosexual women, as the

narrative itself suggests when Stephen pretends to be having an affair with Valerie in order to break her bond with Mary and so free the increasingly unhappy girl to marry a man. Valerie agrees to Stephen's request that she play the part of the Other Woman in no uncertain terms: "If you want to pretend that you're my lover, well, my dear, to be quite frank, I wish it were true--I feel certain you'd make a most charming lover" (433). But the novel does not pursue this narrative thread, closing it off in advance by representing Valerie as a promiscuous and fickle woman incapable of settling down into a serious relationship.

While the novel uses this temperamental incompatibility as a pretext for precluding romance between Stephen and Valerie, Valerie may also be untenable as a love-object because she complicates the novel's dominant representation of the femme as weak and dependent. Valerie is described in traditionally feminine terms; her appeal is described as lying "less in physical attraction than in a great courtesy and understanding, a great will to please, and a great impulse to beauty in all its forms" (246). But she is an anomaly in that she is a feminine woman without heterosexual tendencies. Although there is something of Ellis's description of the femme in Valerie's good figure but plain face, the novel does not represent her as "the pick of the women the average man would pass by," and yet her preference for women is evident. Indeed:



Great men had loved her, great writers had written about her, one had died, it was said, because she had refused him, but Valerie was not attracted to men--yet as Stephen would see if she went to her parties, she had many devoted friends among men. In this respect she was almost unique, being what she was, for men did not resent her. But then of course all intelligent people realized that she was a creature apart. (243-44)

Valerie is also distinct from the other femmes in the novel in that she, like Stephen, is financially independent, being "quite rich, an American uncle had had the foresight to leave her his fortune" (243). Ironically, Valerie's class position, which frees her from financial considerations in her choice of lovers, compounds her incompatibility with Stephen. In keeping with the conservative values of the English landed gentry, Stephen's attachments are to her ancestral estate, loyal servants, and good husbandry, with all its connotations. Valerie, on the other hand, has the values of a more decadent aristocracy, as the Orientalist discourses that define her imply. Her attachments are to wit and beauty wherever she may find them, and she is described, not unkindly but matter-of-factly, as a dilettante, a "lazy" woman with "no urge towards philanthropy" who does little with her talent for writing.

So while the novel constructs differences in class and values as that which prevents romantic liaison between Valerie and Stephen, it may be that the similarity of their economic positions makes such a relationship unworkable

because it threatens the power imbalance of the butch and femme relationship as the novel represents it. Sonja Rhuel argues that the problem of the feminine lesbian is "kept in equilibrium in the novel by . . . social inequality"; in other words, *The Well* casts the femme in the economically dependent position in order to explain her interest in Stephen and uses class difference to uphold gender-essentialism in the representation of the femme as weak (171).<sup>18</sup> As Rhuel points out, all of Stephen's lovers have working- or lower-class backgrounds and respond to Stephen for reasons connected to their class status: Collins, the housemaid, Stephen's first crush, indulges Stephen's romantic overtures because she has to be nice to her employer's daughter; Angela flirts with Stephen because her money-motivated marriage leaves her bored and momentarily without access to a "real man"; and the vulnerable Mary falls in love with Stephen in a wartime situation where women work together in isolation from the traditional heterosexual community. All of these women ultimately choose the economic and social protection of men.

Ironically, then, the combination of Valerie's financial independence from men and her decided preference for women seems to make her an inappropriate object of desire because her interest in Stephen cannot be explained in terms of economic motives. The novel avoids the issue of how to account for Valerie's interest in Stephen by

invoking Orientalism to establish a conflict in class values to put distance between the butch and femme who are on equal economic footing. *The Well's* reluctance to explore the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between butch and femme surely reflects the cultural imperative to represent lesbian lives as tragic, an imperative that was dramatized when the novel was banned for obscenity shortly after its publication, and that informed the doomed endings of lesbian and gay novels through the 1970's. But it also suggests a certain anxiety about the femme, who doesn't fit into the gender/sexual paradigms established by heterosexual and homosexual convention.

The novel's ambivalence about the femme is indicated by the mistrust with which Stephen greets Valerie. In spite of what she knows about Valerie's sexual preferences, Stephen initially perceives her as a "libertine in love's garden" (246). Accordingly, Stephen interprets Valerie's "appraising" gaze to be cataloging, like a "scientist's" or a freak show voyeur's:

She began to fancy that Valerie's eyes had become appraising. They were weighing her up and secretly approving the result, she fancied. A slow anger possessed her. Valerie Seymour was secretly approving, not because her guest was a decent human being with a well-trained brain, with what might some day become a fine talent, but rather because she was seeing before her all the outward stigmata of the abnormal--verily the wounds of One nailed to the cross--that was why Valerie sat there approving. (245-46)

Stephen does not interpret Valerie's approval as expressive of one lesbian's desire for or identification with another lesbian, but as the sort of morbid curiosity about difference expressed by one who occupies an ideologically dominant position to which Stephen, as other, is martyred. Stephen's misinterpretation, later corrected when she tells Valerie: "When we first met I almost disliked you. I thought your interest was purely scientific or morbid. . . . I want to apologize to you now" (408), is in keeping with the representation of the femme as being without active sexual desires. Stephen doesn't realize that she is being cruised because she expects the femme to be the object, not the subject, of the erotic gaze.

Elsewhere in the novel, the appraising or cataloging gaze is clearly aligned with a patriarchal and heterosexist subject position through the figure of Monsieur Pujol, the straight owner of a queer nightclub called the Ideal Bar, for whom looking at difference is a conquest. Pujol's masculinity and sexuality are emphasized to the point of parody when he is described as "the most aggressively normal of men, and none knew better than poor Madame Pujol," a man with six legitimate children and unnumbered illegitimate ones, whose paternal attitude toward his clients is intended to screen his morbid voyeurism:

behind the bar was a small, stuffy sanctum in which this strange man catalogued his collection. The walls of the sanctum were thickly hung with signed photographs, and a good few sketches. At

the back of each frame was a neat little number corresponding to that in a locked leather notebook--it had long been his custom to write up his notes before going home with the milk in the morning. People saw their own faces but not their numbers--no client suspected that locked leather notebook (382).

The notebook recalls the kind of cataloging done by doctors that Stephen discovers hidden in her father's bookcase, even in its use of numbers to identify individual "case studies," and so Pujol is aligned with the ideologically dominant positions of the patriarch and scientist who see without being seen.

Stephen's suspicion that Valerie, whom she knows to identify as homosexual, occupies that same position, can be sustained because the position of being marked is not always visible--in terms of the novel, because Valerie is femme. In *The Well*, the position of the unmarked seems to shift between that of the heterosexual man (Pujol) and the feminine lesbian (Valerie). Technically, however, Valerie cannot assume the position of the unmarked in the same way that Pujol does because she is not of the unmarked dominant categories "male" and "heterosexual." Valerie can be aligned with Pujol because what is at stake here is not the general relationship between the dominant unmarked categories and nondominant marked ones; it is the visibility of each figure's relationship to the lesbian community, or the lesbian community's ability to "read" who is marked (minority) and who is unmarked (dominant).

Although Pujol locates the position of the unmarked in his "normality," he is visible as "them"--male and heterosexual. Valerie, on the other hand, who locates a marked position--female and homosexual--cannot be read so easily, because she doesn't present the "symptom" of lesbianism that the novel has established: masculinity. This creates the anxiety that she could be duplicitous, another Angela Crossby. Valerie's feminine appearance signifies slippage and contradiction: she could be a straight woman passing for a lesbian, a possibility that is enabled by its opposite--if she were a lesbian, she could pass for straight if she wanted to. In the economy of visibility that structures the identity "lesbian" in *The Well*, what Stephen knows about Valerie (that she self-identifies as a lesbian) and what she sees of Valerie (femininity) contradict each other to produce Stephen's suspicion.

But if *The Well* is to entertain the idea of a feminine lesbian it must accept contradiction within its own construction of lesbianism. The novel plays out this struggle with contradiction by repeatedly establishing Valerie as a sort of femme icon and then excluding her from the identity "lesbian" as it is represented by Stephen. For example, in the course of the novel, Stephen comes to accept and even rely on Valerie, who is eventually

described as a source of strength and refuge for "men and women who must carry God's mark on their foreheads":

For Valerie, placid and self-assured, created an atmosphere of courage; everyone felt very normal and brave when they gathered at Valerie Seymour's. There she was, this charming and cultured woman, a kind of lighthouse in a storm-swept ocean. The waves had lashed round her feet in vain; winds had howled; clouds had spued forth their hail and their lightning; torrents had deluged but not destroyed her. The storms, gathering force, broke and drifted away, leaving behind the shipwrecked, the drowning. But when they looked up, the poor spluttering victims, why what would they see but Valerie Seymour! Then a few would strike out boldly for the shore, at the sight of this indestructible creature. (352)

Valerie Seymour ("See More") stands for a different way of seeing the possibilities for lesbians and gays, one that suggests a critique of the conservative social conventions to which Stephen clings.<sup>19</sup> Precisely because her tolerance extends to the "queer," Valerie creates an atmosphere of normalcy outside the heterosexual, upper-class social set that provides Mary and Stephen with "healthy" diversions until it recognizes the nature of their relationship.

Valerie circulates within a bohemian milieu that, as Rhuel remarks, Stephen regards "from a definite class position in the world at large" (172). Although forced to rely on their company, Stephen doesn't entirely approve of the queens and bar dykes who flaunt their homosexuality in public and then suffer for it by being persecuted, ending up "bereft of all social dignity, of all social charts contrived for man's guidance" (Hall 388).

But for all of Valerie's nonchalant mingling with outcasts, it is she who attracts the kind of society that Stephen covets, as the brief, sphinx-like portrait of one of Valerie's former lovers suggests. Unlike the decadent Valerie, the Comtesse de Kerguelen is from old money. She clearly recalls Anna, Stephen's mother, in that she is "dignified and reserved, a very great lady, of a calm and rather old-fashioned beauty. When Valerie introduced her to Stephen, Stephen thought quite suddenly of Morton. And yet," the novel tells us,

she had left all for Valerie Seymour; husband, children and home she had left; facing scandal, opprobrium, persecution. Greater than all these most vital things had been this woman's love for Valerie Seymour. An enigma she seemed, much in need of explaining. (351)

The Comtesse represents the enigma of the upper-class femme with traditional values, the "womanly woman" who has society's approval to lose for self-identifying as a lesbian, but the strength to leave it all behind--in short, Stephen's ideal woman. The brief portrait of the Comtesse can thus be read as the novel's fantasy of the "real femme," a lesbian who is also a lady, in both the moral and the economic senses of the word. That she remains an "enigma much in need of explaining" points to the novel's inability to fully imagine the femme, which is underscored by the way it finally marginalizes Valerie.

For although it is Valerie who foresees that the acceptance of "the abnormal" is necessary to Stephen's



ability to use her innate desire for dignity and respectability to demand tolerance for her community, she abdicates her own power to shape the representation, and thus the definition of lesbianism, to Stephen, in the following speech:

'You're rather a terrible combination: you've the nerves of the abnormal with all that they stand for--you're appallingly over-sensitive, Stephen--well, and then we get the revers de la medaille; you've all the respectable county instincts of the man who cultivates children and acres--any gaps in your fences would always disturb you. . . . But supposing you could bring the two sides of your nature into some sort of friendly amalgamation and compel them to serve you and through you your work--well then I really don't see what's to stop you. The question is, can you ever bring them together?' She smiled. 'If you climb to the highest peak, Valerie Seymour won't be there to see you. It's a charming friendship that we two have found, but it's passing, like so many charming things; however, my dear, let's enjoy it while it lasts, and . . . remember me when you come into your kingdom.' (407-408)

Here Valerie, with all her "insight," positions Stephen as the "real" invert who will lead the world to enlightenment through her art, and defines herself as a sort of transitory member of the community who won't be there to see how Stephen ultimately represents lesbianism to the world. While the novel does not specify any reason for Valerie's prophecy of her own absence, the logic of gender inversion would seem to grant the "kingdom" of lesbian representation to Stephen. As someone who can herself "pass" in and out of the lesbian community, which is

symbolized here by Valerie's friendship with Stephen, the femme cannot be as committed as the butch.

The analysis of the femme's invisibility as a lesbian in *The Well of Loneliness* draws attention to two points about the connection between systems of marking and visibility. Firstly, those who appear to be unmarked within the constructs of a given identity, such as lesbianism, can carry signs of difference associated with other systems of marking, such as racial difference. Secondly, because those signs belong to another register of difference, they serve to exclude the "unmarked" figure from the initial field of representation. The next chapter, which reads Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, shows how the condition of being highly marked also results in a form of invisibility that is based on exclusion. It develops an analysis of such exclusion as a form of fetishism, which is suggested by Stephen's refusal of the feminine to consolidate a masculine identity, and examines the connection between racial and gender/sexual differences within the structures of fetishism.

#### Notes

1. These terms are anachronistic to the period in which Hall was writing. The *OED* gives 1961 as the earliest example of the use of the word "femme" to designate a feminine lesbian in U.S. colloquial usage. But the figures that they have come to stand for are recognizable in Hall's work, in part because her novel helped to shape definitions of the butch. *The Well's* portrayal of Stephen Gordon has been cited as the classic example of the butch as lesbian hero (Zimmerman 72).

2. *The Well* was one of the few novels available from its publication in 1928 through the fifties and sixties, when pulp fiction made more representations of lesbianism available. It was made famous by the obscenity trials surrounding its publication. As the only well-known lesbian novel for decades, it functioned importantly as a "coming out novel" to which women turned for affirmations of their identities. The character of Stephen Gordon is often cited as a literary prototype who "symbolizes the stigma of lesbianism" (Newton 283; see also Zimmerman 36; Cook 719; Faderman 173).

3. Inez Martinez summarizes the critical discomfort with the discursive splitting in the novel:  
[Feminist critics] are embarrassed by her writing style, by the suffering she portrays, and by what they deem her misogyny. Lillian Faderman and Ann Williams in "Radclyffe Hall and the Lesbian Image," Dolores Klatch in *Woman + Woman*, and Blanche Cook in "'Women Alone Stir My Imagination': Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition" all deplore the "self-pity and self-loathing" in Hall's lesbian heroes. Jane Rule in *Lesbian Images* frankly accuses Hall of believing men superior to women and of worshipping patriarchy . . . Both Rule and Cook ascribe this poverty of vision to Hall's reading of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs and Krafft-Ebbing." (127)

4. George Chauncey argues in this vein that it would be wrong to assume . . . that doctors created and defined the identities of 'inverts' and 'homosexuals' at the turn of the century, that people uncritically internalized the new medical models, or even that homosexuality emerged as a fully defined category in the medical discourse itself in the 1870's. Such assumptions attribute inordinate power to ideology as an autonomous social force; they oversimplify the complex dialectic between social conditions, ideology, and consciousness which produce gay identities, and they belie the evidence of preexisting subcultures and identities contained in the [medical] literature itself. ("From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance" 115).

5. On homosexuality as a modern identity, see Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, 43, and Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 1-11. Jonathan Dollimore questions Foucauldian idea that "the homosexual is a creation of modern discourse, medical, sexological and

psychological," persuasively arguing that before the nineteenth century, homosexual acts might have had wider meaning than Foucault allows (*Sexual Dissidence* 237). However, because the concept of sexual inversion that Hall relies on is so clearly a product of the modern discourses that Dollimore mentions, I retain Foucault's history for the purposes of this chapter.

6. On Foucault's anti-visual discourse, see Martin Jay's "In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought."

7. The novel also uses Christian rhetoric to defend the homosexual (see Jean Radford and Joanne Glasgow for more detailed readings of religion and homosexuality). With reference to Cain in specific, Dollimore notes that "Stephen the invert is nothing less than a blend of Cain and Christ, simultaneously transgressing God's law and sacrificing herself to save an ignorant, philistine humanity" (49).

8. The metaphor of castration (Sir Phillip's blind pencil-groping) in connection with Stephen's indiscernibility alludes to the power structures that enable marking. The indiscernible body impedes the dominant figure's ability to control the system of signification that constructs homosexual difference as otherness.

9. Lee Edelman develops the connection between writing, reading, seeing and homosexual difference in his essay "Homographesis," the title of which identifies a term that the author summarizes elsewhere as referring to "the disciplinary and projective fantasy that homosexuality is visibly, morphologically, or semiotically, written upon the flesh, so that homosexuality comes to occupy the stigmatized position of writing itself within the Western metaphysics of presence" ("Tearooms and Sympathy," 571n 23).

10. See Ellis on the high percentage of artists among homosexuals, attributed to their sensitive nerves.

11. Judith Roof points out that Cixous' theory of writing the body also perpetuates binary gender oppositions in her representation of the lesbian by "split[ting] lesbian sexuality into two categories, phallicizing it on the one hand and making it heterogeneously feminine on the other hand" (135). In this, perhaps, Cixous is not any more successful than Hall at evading or subverting oppositional thinking.

12. Gilmore notes that for "the contemporary reader, the use of 'queer' by everyone in the household except her father to describe Stephen is practically redundant . . . the father, a well-read person of means, does not call Stephen 'queer' because he understands more precisely what is strange about his daughter" (609). In her reading of Nella Larsen's *Passing*, which was published the same year as *The Well of Loneliness*, Judith Butler suggests that while at the time, "'queer' did not yet mean homosexual . . . it did encompass an array of meanings associated with deviation from normalcy which might well include the sexual," and so it does resonate with the term's current connotations.

13. Dollimore suggests that the stereotype of the homosexual as unnatural which is embodied in the "camp queen" is "nowhere . . . more violently invoked than when the homosexual has sought a return to nature," and that *The Well* in particular seeks to legitimate homosexuality by naturalizing through the character of the mannish lesbian (48; 55).

14. Alan Sinfield articulates how the concept of effeminacy is "founded in misogyny":  
 Certain manners and behaviors are stigmatized by associating them with 'the feminine'--which is perceived as weak, ineffectual, and unsuited for the world of affairs . . . The root idea is a male falling away from the purposeful reasonableness that is supposed to constitute manliness, into the laxity and weakness conventionally attributed to women. . . The function of effeminacy, as a concept, is to police sexual categories, keeping them pure. (25-26)

15. The rigidity of Hall's conception of gender roles was critiqued by Vera Brittain at the time of the book's publication:

Miss Hall appears to take for granted that this over-emphasis of sex characteristics [to which, Brittain says elsewhere, "the English middle classes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were particularly prone"] is part of the correct education of the normal human being; she therefore makes her 'normal' woman clinging and 'feminine' to exasperation and even describes the attitudes towards love as 'an end in itself' as being a necessary attribute to true womanhood. Many readers will know too many happy wives and mothers for whom it is not, to take on trust Miss Hall's selection of the qualities essential to

one sex or the other. (*Radclyffe Hall: A Case of Obscenity?*, 50)

16. See Sander Gilman's "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Later Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" for a detailed study of how the relationship between the black woman and the as white prostitute as figures for sexual deviance was reinforced by scientific discourses of the late nineteenth century.

17. "Aestheticism and Decadence," Chapter Four of Sinfeld's book, offers a detailed study of the how Wilde crystallized the connection between aestheticism, decadence, and homosexuality.

18. The limitation of Rhuel's otherwise intelligent and useful critique of the connection between class and gender essentialism in *The Well* is that her bias against butch and femme roles causes her to replicate the novel's assumption that these roles mirror heterosexuality. She argues that social inequality is depicted in the novel "in terms which feed into the stereotypical images of the lesbian couple, composed of masculine 'butch' and feminine 'femme,' far more rigidly than anything Ellis wrote" (171).

19. Zimmerman notes that this characterization of Valerie accurately refers to Natalie Barney, who was "virtually unique in her era" in refusing to code her representations of lesbianism or to represent lesbians as damned (7).

## Chapter 2

### **The Invisible Man Meets the Transparent Eyeball: Structures of Fetishism and the Visible in Ellison**

The voice seemed well aware that a piece of science fiction was the last thing I aspired to write. In fact, it seemed to tease me with allusions to that pseudoscientific sociological concept which held that most Afro-American difficulties sprang from our "high visibility," a phrase as double-dealing and insidious as its more recent oxymoronic cousins, "benign neglect" and "reverse discrimination," both of which translate "Keep those Negroes running--but in their same old place." My friends had made wry jokes out of the terms for many years, suggesting that while the darker brother was clearly "checked and balanced"--on the basis of his darkness he glowed, nevertheless, within the American conscience with such intensity that most whites feigned moral blindness toward his predicament . . . . Thus despite the bland assertions of sociologists, "high visibility" actually rendered one un-visible--whether at high noon in Macy's window or illuminated by flaming torches and flashbulbs while undergoing the ritual sacrifice that was dedicated to the ideal of white supremacy.

Ralph Ellison, Introduction to *Invisible Man*

In his 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison explains the power relations that structure American racism through the relationship between visibility and marking, setting up the paradigm that he explores and complicates in the novel. His self-conscious deployment of the terms "visibility" and "invisibility" lucidly maps out trajectories of the gaze from positions of racial dominance and marginalization and so provides an ideal study of how racial identities are configured within discourses of the visible.<sup>1</sup> Analyzing white fetishization of racial

difference is central to Ellison's elucidation of the economy of the visible, and the novel replays the scene of fetishization as it is mediated by whites who occupy various positions of dominance in regard to the narrator. As the novel replays the scene of fetishization through various characters, relations of gender and sexuality to racial difference shift. Although the novel attempts to theorize how these relations alter the configuration of racial identities within discourses of the visible, it is less critical of the terms it invokes in representing gender and sexual difference, and so replicates problems that it successfully deconstructs elsewhere. This chapter begins by analyzing Ellison's critique of systems of marking and in/visibility with reference to racial difference, and goes on to study the collapse of that critique along axes of gender and sexual differences.

For Ellison, the relationship between marking and visibility is based on the paradox that the condition of being marked, or highly visible, renders one socially and politically "un-visible" or unacknowledged, an effect produced by the dominant culture's denial of the very difference by which the other is marked to begin with.<sup>2</sup> As the invisible man will put it toward the end of the novel, "Here I had thought they [white liberals] accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't



see . . . color" (497). Ellison's explanation of the paradoxical coincidence of high visibility and un-visibility works against the tendency to conflate the economies of marking and visibility and, in conflating them, to collapse the complex issues of representation and power designated by each set of terms. Semiotically, "high visibility" and "un-visibility" seem to signify opposite ends of the same spectrum. But in Ellison's schema, "high visibility" belongs to the economy of marking because it is about skin color: dark skin color marks difference, while light skin color--whiteness--goes unmarked (does not signify difference) because it is generic. On the other hand, "un-visibility" belongs to the economy of social and political visibility: white America ignores the historical specificity of the situation of African-Americans because the acknowledgment of difference threatens to expose the contradiction between the white American's "acceptance of the sacred belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not" (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 28).

When the economies of marking and visibility are conflated, the naturalization of both systems allows for the simultaneous insistence on and repression of difference that Homi Bhabha argues is characteristic of fetishism. The construction of dark skin as a signifier of difference is understood to be a "natural" function of seeing, demanding

what Bhabha describes as "the occlusion of the preconstruction or working-up of difference" so that "the difference of the object of discrimination is at once visible and natural--colour as the cultural/political sign of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural 'identity'" ("The other question" 167). Bhabha illustrates how skin color is perceived as the "natural" sign of the black's negative difference in a reading of Franz Fanon.

The reference to Fanon in this discussion of how to analyze issues of representation and power in Ellison's novel is not coincidental. Fanon's book *Black Skins, White Masks* was originally published as *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs* in 1952, the same year that *Invisible Man* was published. Both Fanon and Ellison are interested in the connection between personal identity and social identity, and both take up the project of analyzing how black identity is constructed through the white gaze by dramatizing moments of looking and being looked at that encapsulate "myths of the origin of the marking of the subject within the racist practices of a colonial culture" (Bhabha 1986, 163). In his essay "Critical Fanonism," Henry Louis Gates explains Fanon's currency within postcolonial theory by locating his work at "the convergence of the problematic of colonialism with that of subject formation"; Fanon appeals to the postcolonial critic because he studies both the psychology and the sociology of racism (458).<sup>3</sup>

In his theory of the novel, Ellison also examines the convergence of what he considers sociological issues of identity formation on the one hand, and "personal" or psychological ones on the other hand:

Perhaps the ideal approach to the work of literature would be one allowing for the insight into the deepest psychological motives of the writer at the same time that it examined all external sociological factors operating within a given milieu. (*Shadow and Act* FN 1, 25)

Ellison associates the personal or psychological with the Freudian Oedipal complex; he identifies "parricide, fratricide--incest, [and] homosexuality" as some of the "personal problems" that the artist seeks to exorcise and so transcend (*Shadow and Act* 39). Ellison's definition of the personal as opposed to the sociological is based on his rejection of the "ideological writing" that he associates with the Communist party; he argues that social protest literature can't depict the personal psychology of the individual. As Michel Fabre suggests, Ellison's rejection of the Communist party should not necessarily be read as a wholesale rejection of Marxism per se, but as a rejection of the party's unwillingness to examine its own racism and of what he saw as its insistence on social realism as the only valid form of literature. For Ellison, "the Negro problem" itself located "that blind spot in our knowledge of society where Marx cries out for Freud and Freud for Marx" (*Shadow and Act* 311), and breaking away from social

realism in writing about race relations was a way of bringing together the social and the psychological.

Ellison and Fanon both identify the stereotype as a mechanism that functions along the axes of both the sociological and the psychological. Ellison argues that

the tenacity of the stereotype springs exactly from the fact that its function is no less personal than political. Color prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe . . . whatever else the Negro stereotype might be as a social instrumentality, it is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices. (*Shadow and Act* 28)

The stereotype functions on the psycho-social level by reinforcing what Bhabha calls "the positivity of whiteness" (163); it solidifies white identification with whiteness and alienates blacks from both whiteness, to which they are defined in opposition, and from blackness, which is produced as a negative identity. For Bhabha, the pivotal "primal scene" in *Black Skins, White Masks* that dramatizes the function of the stereotype is the description of an incident in which a white child, frightened by the sight of Fanon, cries, "Look, a Negro!"<sup>4</sup> The child's gaze and words fix Fanon into a "racial epidermal schema" (Fanon 112) that marks his difference "in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye" (Fanon 109):

I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development

of his bodily schema. . . . "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!". . . . I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. . . . I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetichism, racial defects . . . . I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, and excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? (110-112)

Here Fanon represents the stereotype as an instance of the violence of the white gaze, which dislocates black identity, "the self," from the body. Subject to the gaze of the white child, who affirms her own identity in turning away from blackness, Fanon becomes nothing more than what she sees, which is racial difference as negative difference.

The same type of violent dislocation is represented and analyzed repeatedly in *Invisible Man*. The scene most strikingly similar to Fanon's is perhaps the one that depicts Tod Clifton's death. Clifton, a black organizer for the white Communist group "the Brotherhood," is torn between his loyalty to the Brotherhood and his attraction to their enemy, Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist street activist. The conflict reduces him to what appears to be insanity when he leaves the Brotherhood to sell dancing Sambo doll puppets on the street. While Clifton's apparent sellout confuses the narrator, the novel makes clear that his "insanity" is a logical response to the Brotherhood's manipulation of its black members for its own

advancement. In becoming what Fanon would call "the slave of [Negro] archetypes" (35), Clifton is only dramatizing his and the narrator's positions as the Brotherhood's puppets. The epistemological violence inherent in Clifton's own manipulation of the Sambo dolls is literalized when he is shot to death by white policemen for resisting arrest when charged with selling the dolls without a license.

But, as in Fanon's work, the project of *Invisible Man* is not only to represent but to deconstruct the racial/epidermal schema that oppresses the narrator. The novel shows that the condition of being marked, and, ironically, the simultaneous condition of being invisible, cannot be reduced to the evidence of skin color because difference is not produced by the body of the other but by the eye of the beholder. In the opening paragraphs of the novel, the narrator states that his invisibility is not "a matter of a biochemical accident to [his] epidermis": "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). The allusion to H.G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* (1897), in which a "biochemical accident to the epidermis" renders the scientist literally invisible, satirizes pseudo-scientific discourses of racial biology in the 1940's that identified blackness as what Fanon terms a

"corporeal malediction" which scientists attempted to "cure" with potions to chemically whiten black bodies and so eliminate racial difference: "For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for 'denigrification'; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself" (Fanon 111). By aligning the discourses of racial biology with science fiction, *Invisible Man* implies that the equation of race with biology is itself a fiction that denies the social constructedness of racial difference.

The novel insists on this constructedness by revealing how whites are invested in a biologically essentialist fiction about racial difference because it enables them to deny that whiteness depends on blackness for its definition. In Bhabha's reading of Fanon and of the function of the stereotype in colonial discourse, the primary fiction supporting the association of "race" with skin color is the narrative of fetishism. Bhabha argues that the pattern of recognition and disavowal of racial difference, which Ellison explains in terms of the African-American's simultaneous "high visibility" and "un-visibility," is structurally parallel to the mechanism of sexual fetishism:

fetishism is always a 'play' or vacillation  
between the archaic affirmation of

wholeness/similarity--in Freud's terms: 'All men have penises'; in ours 'All men have the same skin/race/culture[']; and the anxiety associated with lack of difference--again, for Freud: 'Some do not have penises'; for us: 'Some do not have the same skin/race/culture'. . . . The fetish or stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and its disavowal of it. (161-62)

*Invisible Man* represents the structure of recognition/disavowal repeatedly, but perhaps most pointedly in the Liberty paint episode, which can be read almost as a map to the structures of racial fetishism. The company, whose motto is "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS," has made its reputation with its best-selling "Optic White" paint, used by the government for its national monuments. The recipe for Optic White is a metaphor for American social structure: it calls for the addition of ten drops of a "dead black" dope into each bucket of white paint, stirred until they disappear. The metaphor shows how identity is based on the simultaneous insistence on and denial of difference; it deconstructs the purity of whiteness by exposing the mechanism of binary opposition, in which the dominant term depends on its opposite for definition. And, as Joseph Urgo explains, the metaphor refers to racial identity in America: "For Ellison, the twentieth-century definition of 'white people' is steeped in the same kind of internal comparison as the optic white formula . . . whatever twentieth-century



'whites' think about 'blacks,' they owe their existence--politically and culturally, and in many cases, genetically--to those same black drops" (19). Here, Urgo alludes not only to the racial intermixing, but to Ellison's argument that "the Negro entered the deepest recesses of the American psyche and became crucially involved in its consciousness, subconscienceness, and conscience" ("Perspective of Literature" 335).

The optic white episode emphasizes fetishism's structural dependence on the simultaneous recognition and disavowal of difference by making the "fact of blackness" understood but unspeakable at the factory, the place of production. When the narrator is instructed to add the black dope to the white paint, he hesitates, questioning his white boss, Kimbro, without naming any colors: "'I don't know, sir . . . I mean. Well, I don't want to start by asking a lot of stupid questions, but do you know what's in this graduate?'" The boss, in turn, snaps at the invisible man without acknowledging the substance of his question: "'You damn right I know . . . You just do what you're told!'" (196). The disavowal expressed here is compounded by Kimbro's inability to see anything but dazzling whiteness when he approves a batch of paint that the narrator has ruined by adding dope from the wrong tank, causing it to turn gooey and tinged with gray. Significantly, the narrator has added paint remover instead

of the black dope, the substances being indistinguishable from one another in the graduate. The incident again reveals the construction of whiteness (associated with cleanliness) through blackness, for while remover normally connotes whitening, here it does not cleanse but taints-- the removal of blackness breaks down the integrity of the white paint, in terms of both color and consistency.

One reason the Optic White episode so fluently maps out the structures of fetishism is that it abstracts the signifiers of racial difference from the body, considering them in isolation from other fields of identity. When the novel replays the scene of fetishism with reference to bodies that are marked not only in terms of race, but also in terms of gender and sexual differences, it often reinscribes itself in the problematics of visibility that it resists elsewhere. For the most part, *Invisible Man* is able to be more explicit in its representation of the structures of racial fetishism than of sexual fetishism. The novel establishes and maintains ironic distance in its representation of whites who desire sexual involvement with blacks by drawing attention to the racial essentialism underlying their fantasies. But it is not as clear that the novel maintains a similar ironic distance on gender essentialism in representing male sexual desire for women, or in representing the figure of the homosexual.

The episode in *Invisible Man* that most obviously reinscribes fetishism into the economy of the visible is the Battle Royal scene, in which the narrator is confronted with "the magnificent blonde," a stripper hired by a white men's club where he is also part of the evening's entertainment. In this episode, Ellison writes about the relationship between black men and white women,<sup>5</sup> tracing, as many critics have noted, the simultaneous incitement and interdiction of black male sexual desire for the white woman as sexual taboo, the symbolic castration of black men for desiring white woman, and the shared victimization and exploitation of black men and white women at the hands of white men.<sup>6</sup> I would add that the scene is also about the ambiguity of racial identity which is mapped out very neatly in the Optic White episode, and suggest that this ambiguity is complicated by the dynamic of sexual difference. Reading the scene in terms of fetishism allows a closer analysis of how the novel structures the relationship between the dynamics of racial and sexual difference.

The Battle Royal episode is self-conscious in its attempt to read discourses of race and gender against each other; the initial description of the blonde merges tropes of race and sexual difference in order to draw attention to the similarities between the fetishizations of the sexual and racial other:

The hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt . . . Her breasts were firm and round as the domes of East Indian temples, and I stood so close as to see the fine skin texture and beads of pearly perspiration glistening like dew around the pink and erected buds of her nipples. (19)

The description first signifies white female sexuality through the class-related markers of too-blonde hair and brightly colored make-up (the "cheap" sexuality of a stripper). But the same make-up that signifies white female sexuality also alludes to stereotypical representations of race in its references to the "abstract mask" of her face and her eyeshadow "the color of a baboon's butt."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the stripper's pink nipples mark her whiteness, but the narrative invokes Orientalist discourses about the sexual exoticism of the racial other in describing her breasts as being "like the domes of East Indian temples." Claudia Tate interprets the blonde's makeup as a masking strategy that works to protect her from what might aptly be thought of as the "penetrating" gaze of the men who watch her; the blonde, Tate argues, teaches the narrator his "first lesson in invisibility" as "a method of concealment" (167). Without refuting this reading of the blonde's masking strategies as a lesson in invisibility, which suggests an alliance between her and the boys, we might also see the blonde's "abstract mask" of color and the Orientalist description of her body as compounding her

difference, and therefore her objectification, by marking her as both racial and sexual other.<sup>8</sup>

While Tate's argument that the blonde teaches the invisible man a lesson in invisibility emphasizes the similarity between her position and the narrator's with regard to the white men at the club, the narrator's response to the blonde begins a narrative of sexual fetishism in which the novel's ironic distance on the implications of black male/white female relationships collapses in a way that reinforces the objectification of sexual difference. The narrator's ambivalent response to the blonde plays out the patterns of attraction/repulsion and of recognition/disavowal that structure fetishism:

I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or to go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed on her belly her thighs formed a capital V. (19)

The sight of her difference, sexual difference charged further by racial difference, demands the narrator's gaze (upon seeing the blond, he declares that "had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked" [19]), but also threatens his identity. This threat to identity occurs at the intersection of discourses about racial and sexual differences which converge around the issue of castration, both as the origin of the male fetishist's anxiety about sexual difference and as the very real threat of

retaliation for the black male's transgression of racial boundaries: for a black man, the punishment for looking at a white woman is, literally, castration; and in the Freudian scene of fetishism, castration anxiety is symbolically about the loss of masculine identity accompanying the recognition of (female) sexual difference. Fetishism masters this anxiety about the loss of identity by substituting another object for the threatening/desirable signifier of difference, an object that both conceals difference and acknowledges it through the very need for concealment. It is in the context of this need for concealment that we can read the narrator's impulse to cover the stripper's body with his own and hide her from prying eyes--his own as well as others'.

While this scene of sexual fetishization in the Battle Royal episode is repeatedly qualified and complicated by the narrator's racial difference, the impulse to cover the white female body with the black male body suggests that the narrator's awareness of his own fetishization as racial other is eclipsed by his participation in the fetishization of the blonde as sexual other. What he does not "see" is that, from the point of view of the white men in the club, covering the blonde's body with his own would make racial difference more visible and dramatize the possibility of miscegenation, a possibility which the white men evoke for the black boys specifically in order to punish them. The

narrator "loses sight of himself"--of his racial difference--because he is caught up in the fantasy of mastering the anxiety around sexual difference, the fantasy of loving and destroying the blonde, in spite of the tattoo which marks her as the property of white-male America, forbidden to black men. He is temporarily oblivious to the threat of punishment that the white woman represents, and continues his reverie about the blonde in terms that shift from the earlier, almost cruel description of her to a romantic, lyrical representation of female sexuality. The passage recalls the dance of the seven veils and what Robert List refers to as the "fetish-ridden bird-girl image" from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*:

And then she began to dance, a slow sensuous movement; the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of veils. She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea. I was transported. (19)

That this romantic tradition is invoked satirically is suggested by the narrator's abrupt reality check:

Then I became aware of the clarinet playing and the big shots yelling at us. Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not. On my right I saw one boy faint. And now a man grabbed him a silver pitcher from a table and stepped close as he dashed ice water upon him . . . his head hung and moans issued from his thick bluish lips. Another began to plead to go home. He was the largest of the group, wearing dark red boxer trunks much too small to conceal the erection which projected from him . . . He tried to hide himself with his boxing gloves. (19-20)

The satire is not directed so much at the sexual fetishization of the blonde as it is at the impossible position of the black boys in relation to the spectacle of white female sexuality. This scene illustrates their powerlessness by drawing parallels between the boys and the blonde as objects of white male control, echoing racial stereotypes in the initial description of the blonde when he describes the boys' thick *bluish* lips and feminizing them when they faint and when they conceal their erections in a gesture symbolic of castration. As Robyn Wiegman points out in her reading of "the anatomy of lynching" in Ellison's 1940 short story "The Birthmark," such feminization and symbolic castration show how the "imposition of feminization works to align the black male, at the symbolic level, with those still unenfranchised [women]" (446). But while the comparisons between the positions of the blonde and the boys as objects of white male control suggest the possibility of political alliance, this possibility exists only in the arena of discourse, where the contradiction between similarity and difference can be maintained. In "real life," which the novel represents happening in the club as opposed to the narrator's mind, the racial and sexual fetishism that structures the relationship between the narrator and the stripper interferes with potential for alliance.



The novel dramatizes the failure of identification when the threat of violence shifts from the boys to the blonde. Having interrupted her performance by grabbing and chasing her, the men catch her and throw her in the air "as college boys are tossed at a hazing" (20). Her body is distorted in the hands of the white men, emphasizing the suggestion of physical violence: "her soft breasts seemed to flatten against the air and her legs flung wildly as she spun" (20). The narrator expresses his sense of connection with her when he interprets her expression as mirroring his own, as he reads it in the faces of the other boys: "above her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys" (20). But the novel has already shown that racial difference prevents the blonde from sympathizing with the boys, structuring this moment of identification as one-sided. The gulf between the narrator's fantasy of identification and the reality of the blonde's failure to identify is indicated in her response to the boy's terror at being forced to witness the spectacle of her sexuality for the amusement of the men in the club. As she dances, she is "faintly smiling at the big shots who watched her with fascination, and faintly smiling at [the boys'] fear," mocking male desire for and fear of her sexuality without seeming to recognize that the boys are as exploited as she is. In exploding the narrator's

fantasy of identification with the blonde by emphasizing her inability to recognize the boys' exploitation, *Invisible Man* shows how the distancing mechanisms of racial stereotyping undercut the discursive parallel between their positions.

The novel is less self-conscious about how the distancing mechanisms of sexual fetishism also undercut the alliance between the blonde and the boys. While the novel vividly portrays the threat of racial violence against the boys, it renders the threat of sexual violence to the stripper almost comically, trivializing what Wiegman terms "the specific materiality of gender oppression" for women. The chase scene, in which the blonde tries to evade the white men, is surreal, reading more like a continuation of her dance than a break into violence: "She began to move around the floor in graceful circles, as they gave chase, slipping and sliding over the polished floor. It was mad. Chairs went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after her" (20). Any sense of real danger to the blonde and of connection between the blonde and the boys is neutralized by the scene's close: "Some of the more sober [men] helped her escape. And I started off the floor, heading for the anteroom with the rest of the boys" (20). The blonde's easy and aided escape emphasizes her alliance with the white men, suggesting that the threat of gang rape was never real, and that sober white men will

protect, not rape, white women. At this point, the novel has displaced the parallel structuring of racial and sexual fetishism by suggesting that racist violence is a more real danger than sexual violence. Ultimately, then, the effect of emasculating the boys by comparison with the blonde is to collapse "the distinction between the imposition of feminization onto male bodies and the historical framework of the feminine as part and parcel of being born female" (Wiegman 465). In failing to maintain this distinction, the novel participates in, rather than critiques, the mechanism of sexual fetishism.

A similar reinscription of fetishism occurs when the novel explores how racial fetishism structures fantasies of homosexual identification in the episode where the invisible man meets "young Emerson," the son of a New York merchant with whom the narrator seeks employment. Here, as in the Battle Royal episode, the novel both exposes and replicates the juncture of identification and fetishization. Ellison depicts how, in the desire for alliance on the white man's part, fantasies of identification are fraught with issues of sexual/racial objectification, but he blunts the effectiveness of that critique in his stereotyped representation of young Emerson.

In shifting from the field of heterosexual to homosexual identification, in which fetishism is not

mediated through a female character, the position of the white spectator changes. In the Battle Royal chapter, the white men are small-town southerners, satirized as fat, cigar-smoking merchants with bald heads, "beefy fingers" and "lips loose and drooling" (20). Young Emerson, however, represents the restrained northern white intellectual, "the figure out of a collar ad: ruddy face with blond hair faultlessly in place, a tropical weave suit draped handsomely from his broad shoulders, his eyes gray and nervous behind clear-framed glasses" (177). Unlike the southern merchants who are overt in their racism and their objectification of the narrator, young Emerson denies his implication in the power structures that oppress blacks and aligns himself with the narrator on the basis of his own oppression as a homosexual by the heterosexual patriarchy, represented by his father.

In his important essay on Ellison's critique of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Kun Jong Lee notes that in name and as the figure for the northern white intellectual, young Emerson is part of a satire of Ralph Waldo Emerson intended to dramatize Emersonianism's "inherently racist dimension" (332). He goes on to say that one of Ellison's projects in *Invisible Man* is to "deconstruct Emerson the philosopher's own terms" by demonstrating that his "ideas do not work for an African American."<sup>9</sup> While Lee's essay does the crucial work of reading *Invisible Man* as a corrective to "the

embedded racist dimension in Emersonianism," his analysis is limited by his assumption that as a stereotype of the "decadent hypocrite" (338), young Emerson does not offer as complex a critique of Emersonianism and white intellectual racism as does Emerson senior. Certainly, Emerson senior, who can "exert his power from afar: an unseen trustee of the hero" (Lee 338), alludes to Emerson's famous trope of the transparent eyeball, which celebrates the transcendent vision of man connected to the natural world: "I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all" (39). In Ellison's re-vision of Emerson, the fantasy of the transparent eyeball authorizes the white man's assumption of the position of the unmarked, from which he observes the world without being seen.<sup>10</sup> But this section of *Invisible Man* is not only about Ralph Waldo Emerson, but is also about a larger field of American literature and literary criticism, and if we pay attention to how the representation of homosexuality relates to Ellison's satire of white American intellectual traditions, young Emerson takes on dimension as part of Ellison's critique of racism.

In effect, Ellison uses the homosexual as a figure for misreading. Firstly, young Emerson reenacts Ralph Waldo Emerson's willful blindness to the power structures that underpin transcendence. Emerson the philosopher depoliticizes and in fact erases the social relations of power, such as the master/servant relationship, that

sustain his assumption of universality by calling them "a trifle and a disturbance" that he transcends in his union with nature.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, young Emerson's erotic fantasy of identification depends on his refusal to acknowledge his own white privilege. The exchange between young Emerson and the narrator critiques the white intellectual's attempt to depoliticize master/servant relationship by satirizing both young Emerson's naive offer to make the narrator his valet, and his suggestion that he has "freed" the narrator by steering him clear of Emerson Senior, while he himself is still his father's "prisoner" (189). The novel shows young Emerson's identification with the narrator to be based on his fetishization of black men as sexual objects. This is evident not only in his invocation of various stereotypes, as when he comments that the narrator has the build of an athlete (179) and offers the narrator a job as his valet (189), but also in the sexually charged language through which he appeals to the narrator's desire to trust: "do you believe it possible for us, the two of us, to throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness?" (183). Discourses of race and homoeroticism converge in young Emerson's references to the "mask" of custom that must be removed and to the "nakedness" in which the two men are to communicate.

Young Emerson's obliviousness to his own implication in power relations of racism is heightened by the fact that

he is surrounded by evidence of how that privilege is based on the exploitation and commodification of the other. The lush reception room of his father's importing firm's offices is dominated by "a huge colored map, from which narrow red silk ribbons stretched tautly from each division of the map to a series of ebony pedestals, upon which sat glass specimen jars containing natural products of various countries"--products from which old Emerson's import firm makes its fortune (177). Emerson Senior's office at once rehistoricizes the natural landscape that sets the stage for transcendentalism, representing it as fragmented, commodified and contained, and conceals the history of slavery that sustains the imperialist's accumulation of foreign wealth: taking in the waiting room, the narrator recalls the museum at his college in which "there was nothing like this . . . only a few cracked relics from slavery times" (178). The framing of the scene can be read as a satire of Ralph Waldo Emerson's romantic description of the American landscape as a backdrop for the scene of colonial encounter:

When the bark of Columbus nears the shore of America;--before it the beach lined with savages, fleeing out of all their huts of cane; the sea behind; and the purple mountains of the Indian Archipelago around, can we separate the man from the living picture? Does not the New World clothe his form with her palm-groves and savannahs as fit drapery? Ever does natural beauty steal in like air, and envelope great actions. (45)

Here, Emerson downplays the commercial significance of the New World as commodity by aestheticizing Columbus' empire-building conquest of the New World.

Although Emerson Senior, as owner of the import firm, stands more for what Alan Sinfeld terms "the manly purposefulness of industry and empire" than does his neurotic son, young Emerson is aligned with the "Kings of the Earth" through his conspicuous consumption of the spoils of empire. The narrator notices "gold links in the soft white cuffs" of Emerson's shirt and the jade ash tray that holds his lit cigarette, and Emerson's entrances and exits from the reception room are marked by the fluttering and squawking of tropical birds in a bamboo cage. This form of consumption is then linked with the commodification of African-American cultural difference when young Emerson alludes to parties with his "Harlem friends" and jazz musicians at Club Calamus, "a rendezvous for writers, artists, and all kinds of celebrities" (182). When Emerson asks if the narrator is familiar with the Club, the invisible man's response, "'I'll have to go there and see what it's like after I've started earning some money,'" pointedly shows how young Emerson's fashionable appreciation of black culture reveals his position of privilege.

In aligning the homosexual in specific with the aesthetic commodification of cultural difference, Ellison



satirizes the bohemian white counter culture's posture of dissidence, which sets art against the crass commercialism of industry and empire.<sup>12</sup> But his satire hinges on a stereotyped representation of the homosexual. Young Emerson is effeminate, "with a long hip-swinging stride that cause[s the narrator] to frown" (177), fluttering hands (180) and a high-strung personality that is intensified by the stresses of therapy: "'I had a difficult session with my analyst last evening and the slightest thing is apt to set me off. Like an alarm clock without control'" (182). In this characterization of young Emerson, Ellison draws uncritically on images of the dandy and an aesthete, which are a component of twentieth-century images of the effeminate homosexual, to lampoon how the white upper class conceals its self-interested exploitation of African-Americans under the guise of "benevolent paternalism."

Young Emerson is also the figure for a second kind of misreading in that he is also the novel's parallel for the white critic who collapses issues of racial and sexual identity. As Alan Nadel points out, the narrator's encounter with young Emerson responds to Leslie Fiedler's famous 1948 essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!," which analyzed *Huckleberry Finn* as a novel "that idealizes homosexual love . . . reflect[ing] a preference of the American young man for bonding with the exotic (black) outcast" (Nadel 127). In "Change the Joke and Slip

the Yoke," Ellison accurately argues that Fiedler collapses discourses of race and sexuality when trying to discuss representations of racial difference:

Fiedler was accused of mere sensationalism when he named the friendship [between Huck and Jim] homosexual, yet I believe him so profoundly disturbed by the manner in which the deep dichotomies symbolized by blackness and whiteness are resolved that, forgetting to look at the specific form of the novel, he leaped squarely into the middle of that tangle of symbolism which he is dedicated to unsnarling, and yelled out his most terrifying name for chaos. (*Shadow and Act* 51)

Here Ellison points out that Fiedler's argument does not adequately account for how discourses of race figure in the depiction of a black man as the ("boy") friend of a white youth.

But in pointing out the shortcomings of Fiedler's essay, Ellison makes two assumptions that are not supported by Fiedler's reading of the "boy's book." First, Ellison implies that in raising the issue of homosexuality, the critic arbitrarily projects his personal metaphor for chaos onto a text that does not itself raise the issue. This, in turn, suggests that in using homosexuality to signal chaos, the critic expresses an understanding of homosexuality as abject, the figure for a loss of identity--an assumption expressed as Ellison's argument unfolds:

Other things being equal, he might have called it "rape," "incest," "parricide," or-- "miscegenation." It is ironic that what to a Negro appears to be a lost fall in Twain's otherwise successful wrestle with the ambiguous

figure in black face is viewed by a critic as a symbolic loss of sexual identity. (51)

While Fiedler's essay does enact certain forms of homophobia, it does not seem accurate to suggest that Fiedler invokes homosexuality as "his most terrifying name for chaos," or that "other things being equal," he might have yelled out something else.<sup>13</sup> Rather, Fiedler argues (without seeming to be terrified himself) that American literature systematically invokes homosexuality, which produces both horror and attraction, in connection with miscegenation as another specter of abjection that produces such ambivalence (417). Further, Fiedler suggests that homosexuality is not a figure for the loss of identity, but rather functions to resolve the threat of racial difference to white identity by assuaging white guilt (420). The limitations of Ellison's own argument with regard to homosexuality are further revealed in the above passage by his distancing of the "Negro" who reads for representations of racial difference from the "critic" who reads homotextually, splitting his own identity as a black literary critic as if to protect himself from the specter of homosexuality by placing "Negro" and "critic" in opposition.

Ellison's response to Fiedler's reading of *Huckleberry Finn* as a homoerotic novel also signals the limitations of his critique of the white intellectual's racism through the phobic representation of young Emerson. Young Emerson, who

refers to himself as "Huckleberry," is clearly a figure for Fiedler. Like Fiedler, young Emerson collapses issues of racial and sexual identity, as when he struggles to announce his discovery of the racist conspiracy among black "trustees" and white businessmen to keep the narrator out of work: "'Some things are just too unjust for words . . . and too ambiguous for either speech or ideas'" (182). He follows his remarks about the injustice and ambiguity of race relations with an allusion to sexual "ambiguity" when he invites the narrator to Club Calamus. The club's name derives from Whitman's homosexual Calamus poems, and is, as Alan Nadel points out, a double allusion, because it also refers to Fiedler's essay, which mentions "the special night club: the 'queer' cafe, the black-and-tan joint, in which fairy or Negro exhibit their fairy-ness, their Negro-ness," making visible their "conditions" (Nadel 128; Fiedler 414). The conflation of racial and sexual ambiguity contributes to the representation of young Emerson's interest in the narrator as predatory. In attempting to speak about issues of racial difference, young Emerson alludes to his own sexual identity and seems to test the invisible man's by touching his knee and claiming to understand who the narrator is based on his friendship with other black men: "'I was trying to tell you that I know things about you--not you personally, but fellows like you. With us it's still Jim and Huck Finn,'" he says,

referencing Fiedler's celebration of "the mutual love of a white man and a colored" (416).

Nadel explains Ellison's anxieties about Fiedler's reading of *Huckleberry Finn* as part of a literary quarrel over defining the novel as a "boy's book"; while for Fiedler the novel "is not about a boy's growing up but about his willfully arrested development" (Nadel 128), "for Ellison--as for Twain himself--*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not a child's book because it represents a boy's learning to make independent, responsible decisions in the face of a pervasively corrupt society" (129). But it is possible to argue that Ellison's rejection of the Fiedler essay is part of a deeper refusal of homosexuality.<sup>14</sup> Ellison's representation of young Emerson draws on the most reductive Freudian theories about homosexuality and exaggerates the visible signifiers of young Emerson's sexual difference: Young Emerson's homosexuality is represented as a state of arrested development linked to neurosis about his father, as is indicated not only by his anxious remarks about Emerson Senior but also by the fact that he is reading Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, which constructs a narrative about how normative heterosexuality evolved out of a primitive organization of sons against fathers that was based on "homosexual feelings and acts" (Freud 502). Emerson is also sexually frustrated and narcissistic; he almost names his desires but then breaks

off, "'You see--well, I'm a thwarted . . . Oh, damn, there I go again, thinking only of myself . . . We're both frustrated, understand?'" (183). The stereotyped representation of Emerson can be read as an attempt to guard against the threatened confusion of racial and sexual identities that Fiedler's essay traces. It repeats the recognition/disavowal pattern of fetishism in that it both insists on the visible signifiers of his sexuality (his swishiness, fluttering hands, nervousness) and refuses homosexuality in its rejection of the Fiedler essay.

I draw attention to the stereotypical representation of young Emerson not to categorize either Ellison or *Invisible Man* as "homophobic," but in order to stress that it is possible to critique the problematics of visibility along one axis of difference and, at the same time, to reinscribe those problems along other axes of difference. Ellison brilliantly maps out the power relations that produce African Americans as both highly marked and as culturally invisibility by satirizing how whites disavow the role that blacks have played in the construction of white identity, but with regard to gender and sexual differences, the novel replicates rather than reveals the mechanisms of fetishism. In the magnificent blonde episode, the stripper is fetishized as the object of desire, while the satire of young Emerson is structured by the fetishistic refusal of the other in the construction of

self-identity. This is a pattern that will be repeated in various configurations throughout the literature that this book examines in an attempt to trace the shifting position of racial, gender and sexual identities with regard to issues of visibility.

In these first two chapters I have argued that reading for paradigms of visibility helps us to understand how both normative and marginalized identities are constructed in relation to discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. While all three terms come in to play in my analysis of both *The Well of Loneliness* and *Invisible Man*, the first chapter is primarily about gender/sexuality, while the second chapter treats race more extensively. However, the structural linkage of these two chapters suggests an analogy between racial difference and homosexuality; my discussion of sexual visibility is followed by a discussion of racial visibility, but I have used the visibility of racial difference as a model for exploring the visibility of sexual difference, implicating myself in Western culture's long history of using race as its model for difference. I would like in the next chapter to explore that analogy more fully in a reading of *Strange Brother*, a novel that invokes that analogy quite explicitly.

#### Notes

1. Todd M. Leiber notes that Ellison's use of the metaphor of invisibility is part of a tradition within African-American literature developed by previous writers

including Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay, and Richard Wright.

2. Eric Sundquist points out the connection between invisibility and the anonymity associated with naming, suggesting that *Invisible Man's* commentary on white refusal of African-American difference anticipates the similar commentary effected by African Americans who draw attention to or "mark" their cultural invisibility with an X:

*Invisible Man* . . . refers by implication to the key role played by anonymity, or namelessness, throughout African American history, from the destruction of African family identities in the slave trade through the legal strictures of the twentieth century . . . . Writing at a time before black nationalists of the 1960s and later years argued for casting off the slave names of the past in favor of African names-- , or, as in the case of the Nation of Islam, for canceling out the master's name altogether in a signature X emblematic of a lost African identity--Ellison in effect argued that African Americans must reclaim their own names and identities by first discarding those imposed on them by whites. (4-5)

3. Diana Fuss also suggests that Fanon is of interest to anti-essentialist poststructuralist critics because he "provides us with something of a running commentary on the arbitrariness of the racial signifier in Western culture" (*Essentially Speaking* 74-76).

4. Bhabha reads this scene in "The other question" (163) and again in "Interrogating identity: the postcolonial prerogative" (185).

5. As he indicates in *Going to the Territory*, One of Ellison's projects in *Invisible Man* is to explore the dynamics of sexual relationships between black men and white women:

Anyone writing from a Negro American point of view with any sort of thoroughness would certainly have had to write about the political meanings and the effects of the relationship between black men and white women, because this became an essence; and a great part of the society was controlled by taboos built around the fear of the white woman and the black man getting together. (62)



At later points in the novel, Ellison plays out sexual encounters between white women and black men in which each very explicitly projects onto the other the fantasies that surround racial difference in America. The wives of the "Brotherhood" leadership test the narrator's sexual prowess by playing out rape fantasies in which they are not held responsible for their desires; the narrator fantasizes about the political and social power that he can gain access to through the sexual possession of white women.

Catherine Saunders, who reads encounters which I do not take up in this chapter, argues that through such scenes, the novel offers two "lessons" about relationships between black men and white women:

White readers have learned that sexual contact between black men and white women is the product of white women's neuroses, not black men's innate tendency to rape, and black male readers have learned that there is no freedom to be gained by sleeping with white women. By exposing the falseness of the system that places such inordinate value on white womanhood, Ellison robs it of much of its power. (19)

But, Saunders goes on to argue, Ellison's critique of stereotypes of black men is limited by his stereotypical representations of women, both white and black. My reading of the magnificent blonde scene is intended to develop Saunders' observation about the limitations of Ellison's critique by focusing on a moment that seems to me to express the fetishization of female sexuality more precisely than the later scenes, which focus more obviously on the fetishization of black male sexuality.

6. On the simultaneous incitement and interdiction of black male sexual desire for the white woman as sexual taboo, and the shared victimization and exploitation of black men and white women at the hands of white men see Claudia Tate. On the symbolic castration of black men for desiring white woman, see George Kent and Houston Baker.

7. For an extended reading of the dialect of the mask in relation to structures of visibility and invisibility in discourses of race, gender, and sexuality, see Corinne E. Blackmer's "African Masks and the Arts of Passing in Gertrude Stein's *Melanctha*" and Nella Larsen's *Passing*."

8. In a similar vein, Saunders argues that in the description of the blonde we can see that "the narrator protects himself against the threat embodied in the woman by objectifying and dehumanizing her . . . seeing her as a doll, a mask, an animal showing its mating colors" (9).

9. For a more optimistic reading of Ellison's literary relationship to Emerson, see Eleanor Lyons's "Ellison's Narrator as Emersonian Scholar," in which she argues that "Ellison portrays an Emersonian affirmation of self and life not only as feasible in our twentieth-century context but also as necessary for reform" (75).

10. In fact, most criticism on *Invisible Man* that deals with the connection between race and sexuality ignores homosexuality in its exclusive focus on the heterosexual narratives of the Battle Royal scene, the Trueblood episode, and the sexual encounters between the invisible man and several wives of the Brotherhood's leaders. Even Leon Forrest, who suggests that young Emerson warns the narrator of betrayal and might represent the possibility of alliance between the invisible man and other marginalized figures, ultimately reinforces the supremacy of heterosexual narratives. He pairs young Emerson with the bluesman of Chapter 9 (who sings about his woman with "feet like a monkey, legs like a frog"), reading both as outlaw figures who "warn the narrator of hidden reality," but ends by replicating Ellison's affirmation of heterosexuality over homosexuality. Although Forrest lends an air of mysticism to young Emerson by comparing him to the hermaphrodite prophet Tiresias, it is the bluesman's heterosexuality that he infuses with the "real" mystical truth-value that is not available to Emerson, who "has nothing but a world of [sexual] confusion." The bluesman, on the other hand, has everything in "a real woman who loves him with a great sexual power . . . [and] who gives him the sexual, naked truth and renders him a celebrant of her naked powers, body and soul" (Forrest 314).

11. For readings of *Nature* that expand on the social and political underpinnings of Emerson's universalism, see Myra Jehlen's *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* and R. Jackson Wilson's "Emerson's *Nature*: A Materialist Reading."

12. See Sinfeld for a historical analysis of how aestheticism and decadence set art against "mechanical, urban, industrial and commercial organization in the modern world" (84-88).

13. Specifically, Fiedler's characterization of homosexuality, in connection with the "boy's book," as infantile and regressive, replicates the belief that homosexuality is an arrested state of development.

14. It could be argued that Nadel himself replicates such a homophobic reading of Fiedler in his criticism on Ellison. In analyzing the young Emerson episode as an

extended joke at Fiedler's expense, Nadel endorses the traditional reading of *Huckleberry Finn* as a bildungsroman in a way that implies that Fiedler's homotextual reading of Twain's novel is an arrested form of literary criticism, just as homosexuality is an arrested state of sexual development. In a somewhat convoluted discussion of what it means that young Emerson calls himself "Huckleberry," a name that rings with "artificial formality" (here the language of artificiality evokes stereotypes of homosexuality as foppish and unnatural) as opposed to "Huck," (which is Huck the character's "real name") Nadel criticizes Fiedler for insisting that *Huckleberry Finn* is a "boy's book"--a genre defined by its "sublimated fantasy of male love" (129). I suggest that for Nadel, the "artificial formality" of "Huckleberry" stands not only for young Emerson as an immature, ineffectual character who is unable to act on the invisible man's behalf as Huck acts on Jim's behalf, but that it also stands for Fiedler's homotextual reading of the novel--a reading that is, for Nadel, ineffectual, immature and generally lacking in comparison to the traditional, anti-homoerotic reading of the novel that stresses a sort of masculine, rugged individualism about a boy's coming of age.

### Chapter 3

#### "The Other Harlem": Performative Differences in Blair Niles' *Strange Brother*

"We can none of us be as natural about sex, can  
we, as the Latin? Or the negro?"

Blair Niles, *Strange Brother*

Scholars who study how analogy and metaphor work in scientific discourses about race and sexuality, especially in the nineteenth century, the heyday of race science and sexology stress that, within such analogies, race is typically the paradigmatic metaphor for difference.<sup>1</sup> As Nancy Stepan explains, "By analogy with the so-called lower races, women, the sexually deviate, the criminal, the urban poor, and the insane were in one way or another constructed as biological 'races apart' whose differences from the white male, and likenesses to each other, 'explained' their different and lower position in the social hierarchy" (41). Read in this context, the emergence in the twentieth-century of what Jeffrey Escoffier has termed the "ethnic model" of homosexual identity (119), by which gays conceptualize themselves as a minority group like racial and ethnic minority groups, reworks old strategies of comparison. the current analogy between racial and sexual minorities is often contested in contemporary criticism and theory because it replicates the logic of racism.<sup>2</sup>

Broadly speaking, the analogy subsumes the specificity of racist oppression under the banner of marginalization. With relation to visibility in specific, the analogy replicates the logic of racism in two ways. When the analogy is used to establish similarities between how the visibility of racial and sexual minorities targets them for discrimination, it does not account for how the visibility of those groups is defined differently. But just as frequently, when the analogy is used to establish differences between how those two groups are defined in relation to structures of the visible, it reifies racial difference as an uncontested category. As Sagri Dhairyam explains, "The oft-evoked contrast between the visibility of race and the invisibility of queer sexuality, then, hierarchizes queer sexuality over race by ignoring the cultural terrorism that maintains race as a stable category to contain its manifestations" (31).

In this chapter, I want to problematize the analogy between racial and sexual differences through a reading of *Strange Brother*, a white-authored Harlem Renaissance novel that quite explicitly draws on the analogy between racial difference and homosexuality. My reading of the novel shows how, as paradigmatic term in the analogy, racial difference is essentialized, stereotyped, and fetishized in order to establish both similarity and difference between the visibility of blacks and gays, and to consolidate the

subject-position of upper-class whites. In that it suppresses some forms of knowlege and creates others (Stepan 48-51), the analogy itself can be understood as a being structured around fetishism's enactment of both the insistence on and the refusal of difference.

The chapter begins by placing the link between racial difference and homosexuality in the context of how primitivism influenced changing sexual ideologies in the 1920's. Specifically, it examines how the primitivist aesthetic enables the defense of homosexuality that *Strange Brother* purports to advance. I argue that the ethnic model of same-sex desire on which the novel relies posits the visibility of racial difference as given, and then presents the "fairy," the effeminate homosexual, to suggest that homosexuality is similarly visible on the body. Ultimately, however, the novel can affirm the visibility of same-sex desire only in relation to the already marked black body. Mark, the novel's sympathetic white homosexual, is dead by the end of the novel, a victim of his inability to survive in "the life," as were most lesbian and gay characters in fiction through the 1960's.

The question to be asked, then, is why the novel can affirm same-sex desire only in relation to the black body. The last section of the chapter explores that question by drawing attention to the subtext of lesbian desire that structures the novel. Within this context I develop the

argument begun in the earlier reading of the novel, which suggests that according to the mechanisms of fetishism, the black body can be the site of a sexual plentitude, where all sexualities are affirmed, because it is also constructed as the site of lack. Finally, I conclude that the novel reveals the process through which the white upper-class subject guards itself against this lack by making the other's difference visible in order to naturalize its own race, class, and sexual identities.

#### **Primitivism and Sexual Ideology in the 1920's**

*Strange Brother*, written by Blair Niles (1880-?), daughter of a Virginia plantation owner, whose acquaintance with her father's black tenants gave her what one biographer describes as "a sensitivity to alien cultures," is one of the earliest American novels to depict an openly gay character. It was first published in 1931 and was out of print for nearly sixty years until Gay Modern Classics (The Gay Men's Press, British) reissued it in 1991. The novel is set in Harlem; the year is 1927. The main characters, June and Mark, meet by chance at the Magnolia Club, a Jim Crow club where black entertainers perform for white audiences. June, a fashionable white socialite, is there "in search of the exotic" while Mark, a tortured homosexual artist, seeks "temporary and comforting respite from the alienation of his 'shadow world'--the world of homosexuality" (dust jacket). The novel tells the story of

their friendship during one hot New York summer, when, as Langston Hughes puts it, "the Negro was in Vogue."

The book was one of "a flurry of gay-themed novels [that] appeared between 1931 and 1934" (Chauncey, *Gay New York* 324). Although widely discussed among gay men, the novel was reviewed by the mainstream press as being a little seamy in its "faintly disreputable exoticism" and its sympathy, if not approval, for the "panorama of abnormality" it depicted (*The Saturday Review of Literature*, 1931). Today, *Strange Brother* is occasionally mentioned in overviews of Harlem Renaissance fiction and often mentioned in overviews of gay-themed fiction for its representation of Harlem's gay life.<sup>3</sup>

*Strange Brother* is in many ways a sequel to Niles's 1928 novel, *Condemned to Devil's Island*, a fictionalized account of the lives of white convicts in French New Guinea's infamous penal colonies that anticipates *Strange Brother's* interest in the figures of the primitive and the homosexual. In her introduction to *Condemned*, Niles discusses how her work as a journalist lets her observe the contrast between the "civilized" Frenchman turned criminal and New Guinea's population of "savage" blacks descended from African slaves. She says:

I selected the notorious Devil's Island Penal Colony as the place where I would make my investigation, because there the drama of the criminal is staged against a background of tropical jungle, where descendants of escaped negro slaves live the jungle life of Africa;



dancing the African dances and worshipping the African gods. While, locked behind the bars of prison, are criminals sent from highly civilized France. The Devil's Island Colony thus offers a startling contrast between the primitive and the civilized. (xiii)

This passage exemplifies the primitivist aesthetic of the 20's that arose as part of the modernist reaction against industrialization and "functioned as a kind of inoculation" against the perception that civilization was destructive and evil (Coles and Isaacs 3). In exploring the contrast between the primitive and the civilized, Niles uses the regimented penal system to represent civilization's dehumanizing qualities; the jungle surrounding the prison, where the Bushmen dance and sing at night, represents freedom. Although she avoids overt references to it in her introduction to *Condemned*, rather coyly stating that she wants to examine "what happens to a man when suddenly woman is taken from life, and stripped of all, he stands starkly forth" (xiii), the novel is also fascinated with the homosexual subculture of prison life, especially with how relationships that begin as a form of prostitution in which sex is exchanged for food and protection are transformed into a passion "that flares up into a holy flame . . . something beautiful that grows out of the filth of prison" (133). In that they are represented as fulfilling basic needs for love and physical desire, these affairs are associated with the liberating and instinctive sexuality of the natives who populate the jungle surrounding the

prisons. The analogy between the homosexual and the black, though not fully developed in *Condemned*, lets Niles use primitivism to establish the "naturalness" of homosexuality, a strategy that she uses more extensively in *Strange Brother*.

Primitivism was not, of course, new to the 1920's. Arthur O. Lovejoy, who in 1935 defined cultural primitivism as "the discontent of the civilized with civilization," imagines that the cave men themselves "discoursed with contempt upon the cowardly effeminacy of living under shelter" (7). Critics most frequently argue that primitivism crystallized in the twenties because World War I trench warfare had demonstrated the self-destructive capacity of machinery and weaponry supposedly created to defend and advance civilization.<sup>4</sup> But changing discourses about sexuality also made primitivism the cultural force of the moment in the twenties. Freud's visit to Clark University in 1909 lent authority to America's growing reaction against "civilized" sexual morality; to young American doctors and intellectuals, Freud's theories seemed to call for the unleashing of repressed sexual instincts in order to promote a new and healthier society (Hale 58-59). Sexologists such as Carpenter and Ellis, who were widely read in America, reinforced this belief in the liberating potential of sexual expression by equating sex with "all that is most simple and natural and pure and good"

(D'Emilio and Freedman 225-26). And by the end of World War I, anthropologists conducting comparative studies of sexual relations among "primitive" peoples were "depicting remote tribesmen and women enviably at home with the contours of their own bodies and casual and natural in their relations with one another . . . suggest[ing] a world that Western industrialized society had left at a considerable price" (Brown 37). In the twenties then, primitivism--the idea that the "lower" races had access to a more authentic and healthy experience of sexuality--counteracted the white bourgeoisie's sense that over-civilization was producing "moral impotence and spiritual sterility" among their class (Lears 4-5).

Sterility was more than a metaphor for overcivilization; it was a diagnosis. Between 1892 and 1919, Theodore Roosevelt expressed his alarm over the declining fertility of the "higher" races and classes in his developing theory of "race suicide." Roosevelt worried that "Americans of old stock" were choosing to have small families, or worse, selfishly refusing to have children, in order to afford themselves luxuries and leisure time. This decadence put them in danger of being overrun by immigrant and black populations (Dyer 143-167; Roosevelt, "Race Decadence" and "Women and the Home").<sup>5</sup> While Roosevelt felt that sterility among the white upper classes was "willful," turn of the century sexologists saw impotence

among white, middle-class men as a physiological symptom of overcivilization. In his article on changing discourses on impotence, Kevin J. Mumford notes that sexologist "Wilhelm Stekel opened his two-volume treatise on male impotence with the declaration that 'in men love-inadequacy is increasing to an alarming degree, and impotence has come to be associated with modern civilization'"; black men, and the immigrant working classes, however, were thought to be immune to the influences of civilization and therefore impotency (Mumford 90). Anthony Rotundo explains that the fantasy of the primitive's sexual potency translated into a romanticized association between masculinity and the primitive: "Rather than civilize themselves according to a feminized definition, men took negative labels affixed to their character and made them into virtues. Primitive, savage, barbarian, passion, impulse--the underside of male character that bourgeois culture had stigmatized was now brought to light for fond inspection" (253).

But the primitive became a marker for more than just masculine heterosexuality. By the twenties, modern discourses of sexuality advocated "the right to sexual pleasure independent from concerns about reproduction" and emphasized "women's sexual needs and capacities, and the public identification of diverse sexual identities (especially homosexuality)" (Trimberger 132). It was this new sexual morality that produced the link between the

homosexual and the primitive that Niles explores in her novels. Just as the models for heterosexual freedom were informed by primitivism, sexologists sought to decriminalize homosexuality by pointing to its well-tolerated existence within primitive and ancient societies. But the new sexual morality, especially as it was influenced by feminism and the more liberal strands of sexology, was not uniformly accepted. The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century cult of masculinity also created the conditions for the refusal of homosexuality as the worst form of effeminacy.<sup>6</sup> Thus, as Ellen Kay Trimberger notes, the more radical implications of the new sexual morality, including female sexual autonomy and the acceptance of homosexuality, were eventually recuperated by a "reformulation of the modern ideal of sexual intimacy into that of the companionate marriage," which attacked feminism and homosexuality and advocated sexual liberation for women only insofar as it reinforced heterosexual monogamy (148).

*Strange Brother* can be read as a map of conflicting discourses of sexuality in which the figures of the New Woman, the homosexual, and the primitive circulate with the specter of white male sterility. In that the novel represents the competition between modern sexual ideologies and older sexual ideologies, it champions sexual liberation for women and gays. But the novel also strategically

positions conflicting discourses of sexuality so as to allay its own anxiety about this brave new world of sexual liberation, and to contain the figures that most clearly provoke that anxiety: the homosexual and the primitive.

June, the white socialite whose story frames the narrative, is the focus for the novel's pattern of conflicting sexual ideologies. Through her relationships with men, she represents the emergence of modern love from the outmoded sexual ideologies of the nineteenth-century, and also reveals how the rejection of older sexual ideologies remained linked to concerns about the decadence and sterility of upper-class white men. June, who divorces her rich, well-connected husband to seek a romantic relationship that will meet her needs for both companionship and sexual fulfillment, clearly embodies the new sexual morality of the 1920's, especially "the desire to combine mutual sexual fulfillment with personal intimacy" (Trimberger 132-33).

What threatens June's ability to achieve that fulfillment and intimacy is the difficulty of finding the right man. The success of companionate marriage depended upon men's willingness to adapt to women's new social and sexual equality. June's love interest in the novel, Seth Vaughn, represents the anxiety that the cost of abandoning traditional heterosexual relationships might be virility itself, leaving women unable to find satisfactory partners

for the companionate marriage; after Seth's death at the end of the novel, June discovers that he has been concealing "the impotence of his approaching age" (339). From the beginning of the novel there are indications that Seth is a bit stodgy in his attachment to traditional social arrangements. June first meets the mature and dashing Seth when writing up his profile for the Woman's Page of the evening newspaper, a "for-fun" job she holds to supplement her alimony payments. In the profile, which describes Seth's potential as a guest of ladies' clubs, June says of her interviewee that "intellectually he was reasonably modern, that he mildly sponsored the cults of Equality and Birth Control, and that he was not bitter about Companionate Marriage, although his support was not too ardent" (20). The language here connotes a tepid sexual as well as intellectual response to the new morality of the twenties.

Seth reveals his allegiance to conventional morality when his daughter gets married. He easily assumes the role of father of the virgin bride, "assent[ing] to the Church of England formula which gave the woman to the man" (221). While Seth honors tradition, June finds the wedding ceremony tedious; she notes the predictable music, the "slabs of gummy cake," "the usual food," "the same old" toasts and compliments, "so threadbare with usage" (223). But the real conflict in ideology arises around the issue

of reproduction. June refuses the link between marriage, sexuality, and reproduction that the traditional wedding represents. Confronted with the image of father and bride, she imagines that the body of Seth as her would be lover--the sexual body--and the body of Seth as a father--the reproductive body--are not the same:

What was it that people said about human bodies undergoing a complete change every seven years? Did that mean that actually, cellularly speaking, every particle of which a man was composed was thus renewed? . . . . suppose it to be true, then the Seth who stood beside that shimmering bridal figure was not the same as the man from whose loins, as they say, she had sprung three times seven years ago. Then, for all his fatherhood, her Seth, the Seth that June knew and loved, was not really the man who had, in the strange exaltation of sex, created the child who was now being united to Tracy Boyd in what the rector was pronouncing "holy wedlock." (221-22)

Seth, on the other hand, affirms equation between marriage, sexuality and reproduction; when she argues that "it's farcical to want to continue--vicariously--in the life of generations to come," he explains that his daughter's marriage will assure him "a kind of immortality denied to the childless" (227). But June associates the traditional wedding not with immortality but with death; when the rector says, "till death do them part," June suddenly sees each face in the wedding party "as though it had been a dead face, upturned and infinitely still" (224).

Theoretically, at least, homosexuality offers one model for the kind of relationship June wants--one in which sexual intimacy does not presuppose reproduction. If Seth



fails to appreciate June's modern ideas about love, June's gay friend Mark understands them better. He is the one able to say to her "don't you think that the people of my world [gays], by their very existence, in a way prove that there's no real connection between sex and reproduction?" (203). Overtly, the novel suggests that June's innate sympathy with Mark, whose "lifestyle" is a revelation to her, is based on their "shared preoccupation with love." Less explicitly, the novel implies that the two are aligned in their shared "feminine" desire for masculine men who will not or cannot meet their sexual and emotional needs. Mark falls in love with virile heterosexual men who will inevitably refuse him: "The man I love could never even know that I loved him. If he did . . . I'd lose even his friendship" (155). June is in love with the elusive Seth, who always pulls away when physical intimacy seems immanent.

While this shared predicament appears to be the basis for June's sympathy toward homosexuality, I would argue that in *Strange Brother*, it also locates the heterosexual woman's anxiety about how the new sexual ideology of the twenties, including the acceptance of homosexuality, impacts her ability to find a satisfactory partner. The novel carefully avoids depicting any competition between Mark and June for the object of desire--the heterosexual white man; because Mark falls in love with June's cousin,

not her boyfriend, Seth's heterosexuality is not in question, even if his potency is. Rather, the novel's anxiety about how the acceptance of homosexuality compromises virility is embodied in Palmer, June's ex-husband, who does turn out to be gay. In recalling her marriage, June describes Palmer as an unaccountably cold man who mercenarily amassed collections of European art, had his decorated house in opulent period styles, and regarded June as one of his *objets d'art*. His coldness toward June is later explained when she recognizes him at a drag ball in Harlem. Palmer realizes the fear that "all the good ones are married or gay," or worse yet, married and gay.

#### **Harlem Nights: Sexuality Made Visible**

While Palmer is one of many minor figures in the novel, his role is significant. Within the white upper class, he locates an instability of meaning around signifiers of sexuality, raising the question of how to identify the gay man passing for straight. To make Palmer readable, *Strange Brother* defines the marks of homosexual visibility on the body of the authentic Harlemit, the flamboyant denizen of the "shadow world," and then reads those signs back onto Palmer, who appears unmarked in the Society worlds of Palm Beach and Newport.

The signification of Palmer's homosexuality is a matter of context. The youthful, naive June initially reads

Palmer as the strong silent Byronic type who cuts a dashing figure in the romantic setting of his "Italian room" on the night he proposes to her:

In Palmer's Italian room I felt myself to be in some Venetian palace. I fancied that outside a gondola waited for me, moored to a painted post . . . and then I saw Palmer Fleming was standing in the door, looking at me . . . . he fitted into the picture, with his regular delicate features and his mustache black against his white skin . . . I took strength for granted in a man. So I looked for love of beauty to be added to strength. I thought Palmer had both" (116).

Later June discovers that "he didn't have the manly strength which I had taken for granted . . . he was indolent and absent-minded" (117). But it isn't until she sees her ex-husband at the Drag ball, where homosexual difference is on display, that June recognizes the signs of that difference on Palmer. Her eye-opening experience begins with the parade of fairies who take over the ballroom floor:

In the men's assumption of feminine graces there was just enough emphasis and selection to transpose such qualities from the world of Nature to that of Art; the usual, by skillful exaggeration, taking on the accent of novelty, so that the beholder saw freshly and consciously characteristics long ago become blurred by familiarity.

"They make us see ourselves!" June exclaimed. "Actually, it's as though I never had really seen a woman before!" (212)

Here, the fairy's gender/sexual identity is visible as performative (whereas women's femininity or men's masculinity, even when it is as obviously staged as

Roosevelt's posing for photos on safari, seems not to be marked as performative) because his exaggerated, hyper-femininity signals the self-conscious assumption of a gender role that is dissonant with the viewer's knowledge of his sex.<sup>7</sup> The fairy at once reinforces and disrupts the distinction between Nature and Art evoked in this passage. What is "natural" on the female body is "art"--or artifice--on the male body. But the fairy also makes visible the performativity of femininity in general; June sees, as if for the first time, how women's femininity is also produced by a repetition of gendered characteristics that seem natural because they are expected.

Having been sensitized by the flamboyant spectacle of the fairies, June's attention is caught by a movement in an adjoining box of spectators. She recognizes Palmer dressed in the antique Venetian gondolier costume that he purchased on their honeymoon, and in the context of the ball, June is finally able to correctly interpret the meaning of Palmer's lack of virility and his taste for exotic beauty: "Now the truth was all at once made visible to her, but the fact--like the unknown facts of radio and electricity--had been there all along" (220). In Palmer's costume, the signifiers of aestheticism and homosexuality overlap as they do in Ellison's portrayal of young Emerson. While the Venetian gondolier costume is not necessarily coded as feminine,

Palmer's interest in art, fashion, and decor suddenly read as effeminate, not just effete.

Further, the Venetian costume registers as a form of gay drag because, as Chauncey notes in his book *Gay New York*, "By the late nineteenth century, southern Italian men had a reputation in northern Italy and in the northern European gay world for their supposed willingness to engage in homosexual relations" (74). This reputation, which extended to the Italian immigrant community in America, allows *Strange Brother* to position the Italian as a sort of intermediate figure when it uses racial difference to underpin the construction of homosexuality as a visible, as my reading of the novel will discuss more fully later.

With the shift in context from the Social Register to the Drag Ball, then, the invisible fact of Palmer's homosexuality becomes visible; suddenly it is clear that for him, the romance of Italy was never heterosexual. Reread in the correct context, Palmer recalls Roosevelt's paranoia about "race decadence," and clarifies how the discourses of sterility and decadence are linked to the figure of the homosexual. Palmer is the type of sensuous, effeminate aristocrat against which "normal robust manhood" defined itself by the turn of the century (Mosse 225).

While the novel constructs Palmer's homosexuality as at once invisible and visible, June's contained response to the discovery of Palmer's homosexuality seems to belie any

anxiety about misreading the passing homosexual for straight. She checks her "impulse to greet Palmer with the simple friendliness which she felt for him" out of an instinctive sense that he "would not have wanted her to know," and her discovery is described as a process of enlightenment: "And seeing the truth, June saw also, the infinite plot complications of life, its complexities revealed in the searching light of fact" (220). But rather than focus on the particular "plot complication" that Palmer suggests (a plot that complicates the narrative of upper class white heterosexuality) the novel explores issues of visibility and passing through Mark and his experiences in Harlem. Ultimately the focus on Harlem is the premise for the novel's analogy between racial difference and homosexuality, which works to contain the threat of homosexuality by establishing that, like racial difference, it is natural to a small percentage of the population and discernable to those in the know.

The ethnic model of homosexual identity that dominates *Strange Brother* was supported by gays who had begun, by the 1920's, to conceptualize themselves as a minority group. In her study of sexuality in the twenties, Lilian Faderman notes that Harlem was a focal point for this formative gay identity because it represented, among other things, a community built around and accepting of difference.

Faderman quotes *Strange Brother* in explaining how Harlem was perceived by gays as a model for tolerance:

To those [whites] who already defined themselves as homosexual, Harlem seemed a refuge for which they were grateful. With an emerging homosexual consciousness, they began, probably for the first time in America, to see themselves as a minority that was not unlike racial minorities. They compared their social discomfort as homosexuals in the world at large with the discomfort of black people in the white world. Some sensed, as one character says in a novel about the period, a bond between themselves and blacks because both groups flourished under heavy odds, and they believed that blacks also acknowledged that bond: "In Harlem I found courage and joy and tolerance. I can be myself there. . . . They all know about me and I don't have to lie." (68)

Here Mark describes a connection between blacks and gays based on sympathy. But within the discourses of sexology that establish scientific authorization for the ethnic model of homosexuality in the novel, the analogy between racial and homosexual differences is predicated not on the shared experience of oppression, but on the conception of racial difference as a biological, natural fact whose visible evidence is skin color.

*Strange Brother* deploys the rhetoric of visibility to suggest that homosexual difference is both like and not like racial difference. It uses racial difference to raise the problematic issue of sexual visibility, while leaving racial visibility itself unproblematicized. As the paradigmatic term in the analogy between race and homosexuality, racial difference is essentialized and stereotyped. The link between the two categories is

established in the opening scenes of the novel, which bring up the issue of sexual visibility, specifically of passing for straight, in relation to the issue of segregation and racial passing. In the Jim Crow club where June watches a black cabaret singer, Glory, perform for a white audience, Mark is seated at the back with two black men: Ira, Glory's boyfriend, and his friend Caleb, who are forced to watch the show from a discreet corner of the room.

The novel renders blacks culturally invisible even as it makes them signify the visibility of difference by serving as a contrast to Mark. The black men blend into the shadows; they are literally like H.G. Wells's invisible man, an empty suit of clothes. June thinks that they "scarcely seemed to have faces at all" and that "above their white shirt fronts there seemed only shadows, blacker and more tangible than the shadows of the corner." Between them is Mark (the name can be read as a pun on how he signifies homosexual difference), whose "face and hair stood out so extraordinarily fair" "like a pale oval moon in a dark sky" (15). The black men are the background that marks whiteness, where whiteness is coded in terms of race but stands more as a prelude to the "real" aspect of Mark's difference, his homosexuality. So it is homosexuality, via whiteness, that is made visible against the background of racial difference.



The novel can use racial visibility to raise the issue of sexual visibility because it posits the visibility of skin color as natural, obvious, and indelible, while sexual visibility seems less obvious or stable. Caleb and Ira, Mark's shadowy black friends, say that Mark can pass for straight but "If you're black, everybody's got to know it. Can't wash yourself white, nor powder yourself white either. Even if you're light complected, somewhere there'll be something to give you away. Maybe behind your ears, or maybe the color of your finger-nails" (28). Mark expresses his desire for the same kind of indelible visibility, suggesting that if everyone knew he were gay he would be spared the humiliation of having to pretend to be something he's not.

In identifying with blacks, then, Mark constructs African-American visibility as a form of privilege by rendering it a sign of the kind of fixed, stable identity he lacks. His desire for the fixed identity that the other seems to embody is also expressed through his eroticization of darkness and class difference, not with direct reference to the black, but with reference to the Italian as an intermediate figure for both racial and homosexual differences. His first crush, Luis, whose mother was South American, "'wasn't like any of the other boys. The first day he went to school the boys yelled 'Eyetalian' after him. He had dark hair and skin like an Italian'" (142).

Here, as with Palmer, the Italian becomes the figure for homosexual desire, and suggests how the association of the immigrant with manliness, which was part of the discourse of overcivilization that eschewed homosexuality, also became part of the cult of masculinity within the middle-class homosexual subculture. In positioning the other to solidify himself, Mark makes darkness a sexual marker for the naturalness of masculinity, associating Luis with a "young black stallion" that roams in an alfalfa field near the pond where the two boys swim. As the dark, masculine other, Luis completes Mark, who says, "'I can't remember anything about myself before Luis came . . . . I can't see myself before that'" (143). Here, as in the Magnolia Club, Mark becomes visible against the background of darkness.

Replicating the mechanisms of fetishism, Mark's desire for the immigrant other threatens as well as consolidates his middle-class, white identity. The novel guards against Mark's desire to cross boundaries of ethnic/racial difference with Luis by positioning class difference as what interrupts the boys' friendship; while Mark envisions lazy summer days by the pond, Luis announces that he will have to spend the summer working at a canning factory in a nearby town. The novel is more explicit about the threat of difference in its representation of Rico, the Italian fruit vendor who has a stall outside of the settlement house where Mark teaches. With Rico, the association between the

Italian and the homosexual is fully realized; not only does June remark upon seeing Rico that "the boy is Sicily," which she knows because she and *Palmer* spent a winter there, but Rico has a crush on Mark--he always gives Mark four apples for the price of three and watches him longingly.

While Mark admires Rico's "exotic beauty" and "animal happiness," the adult Mark has transferred his desire for the dark other to a safer love-object--a white man with darkened skin. Mark is smitten with Phil, June's cousin, an upper-class white man who can carry the signs of darkness and masculinity: "'I like his color. I wonder where he's been to get deep tanned like that . . . he's as strong and tanned as the life-savers on the beach'" (46-47). The reader knows that he gets his tan through contact with the primitive when he goes to the jungle to study insects. Phil can thus satisfy the fantasy of difference without the threat of crossing race and class boundaries.

Rico will eventually act out the threat of what can come of crossing class boundaries. Early in the novel Rico's mother hints that the family fled Italy because they displeased their Mafia bosses, and the criminal element of Rico's Sicilian origins emerges when he confronts Mark about his sexuality. Jealous of a queen that Mark befriends in an effort to come to terms with the effeminate of "his own kind," Rico threatens Mark with blackmail, and Mark

responds by committing suicide. Clearly, then, associating with the lower classes represents the threatened loss of middle-class status.

Another way the novel expresses anxiety about class difference is through Mark's dislike of the effeminate homosexual, represented by Nelly, the fairy with plucked brows, marcelled, blondined hair, painted nails and powdered face, whom Mark encounters at the Lobster Pot, a club that he visits with June when they leave the Magnolia Club. Like the fairies at the ball, Nelly makes sexual identity visible as performative because his hyper-femininity registers as dissonant against the male body. Nelly's femininity, as the mark of performativity, becomes the vehicle through which the marks of class difference that are fetishized elsewhere in the novel are rejected when they threaten to collapse rather than solidify Mark's identity.

Nelly is the white working-class counterpart to the Italian immigrant. Whereas Luis and Rico embody Marks ideals about "manly love" à la Walt Whitman, who "stood for a non-effeminate gentleness, a love for men that was unquestionable masculine" (Chauncey, *GNY* 105), Nelly is the type of effeminate man that Mark loathes because he "makes a mockery" of the more staid, less flamboyant style that enables Mark to pass for straight. In speaking to Caleb and Ira at the Jim Crow Magnolia Club, which exudes middle-

class respectability, Mark deplores his ability to pass for straight, but when Nelly enters the Lobster Pot, the working class after-hours club where Harlemites do their real socializing, the fairy's visibility throws Mark's ability to pass into question by suggesting that homosexuality can, after all, like racial difference, be visible on the body. Mark's disgust for the effeminate homosexual is a form of class antagonism between groups Chauncey terms the middle-class "queers" and working-class "fairies":

the style of the fairy was more likely to be adopted by young and poorer men who had relatively little at stake in the straight middle-class world, where the loss of respect the fairy style entailed could be costly indeed. Most men who were involved in that world sought to pass in it by adopting the style of queers, who typically displayed their homosexuality only in more private settings . . . . [middle-class queers] believed it was the flagrant behavior of the fairies on the street that had given the public its negative perception of all homosexuals. (GNY, 102-103)

The novel encodes the class-bound aspect of Mark's antagonism toward Nelly in Mark expression of his fear of being "classed" with Nelly. Here, Mark overtly refers to his fear that his own body reveals signs of his sexuality, but the phrase carries a more literal meaning as well, in that Mark's own class status could be more secure. He is marginally middle class, teaching at a settlement house where the discovery of homosexuality would get him fired, and then he too would be on the street. His status as an

underpaid professional leaves him, as Rico will prove, subject to blackmail, as a richer man would be, but without the money to buy his security.

The dangerous consequences of the form of gay visibility that Nelly represents are dramatized when Nelly is entrapped and arrested for solicitation by a plain clothes cop who targets him at the club. At June's request, Mark follows up on Nelly's trial and sentencing to Welfare Island. The court scene enacts the Law's surveillance of homosexuals, and Nelly's effeminacy incriminates him on the stand: "He raised his hand, and with an unmistakably feminine gesture he patted into place his blondined waves. When he lifted his hand his cuff slipped back and revealed a gilt bangle" (98).

The threat of Nelly's effeminacy is heightened by his whiteness because with Nelly, racial difference cannot function as a buffer between Mark and the working class as it does with Luis and Rico. While Mark uses the language of racial difference metaphorically to distance himself from Nelly, describing Nelly as belonging to the "tribe" of homosexuals that Mark loathes, the initial description of Nelly is curiously uncoded by race; in this club scene where the racial identity of most of the patrons and staff is named, Nelly and his companions are not identified as white or black. But once Nelly is under the law's gaze, the novel obsesses on his whiteness, and how it enhances his

telltale signs of effeminacy. In the grip of the plain-clothes man, Nelly blanches, "leaving the outline of the rouge clearly marked, like a hectic fever spot," and in the courtroom, when his rouge and powder are washed off, leaving Nelly "appallingly white," his plucked eyebrows and marcelled, blondined hair remain to testify against him (66; 96). Here, it is the signifiers of gay visibility on the ground not just of the male body, but the white male body, that threaten Mark's assurance that he can pass for straight and avoid being subjected to the gaze of the law.

Mark's fearful response to Nelly's sexual visibility is immediate and tangible. When Mark leaves the courtroom, he stops before a mirror in a shop window to inspect himself for signs that might reveal him to the Law. While he sees none, he fears that he might be deceiving himself, and wonders "How does the Law read anyway?" He goes to the library and finds that under Section 690, Crimes against Nature, he is not considered any more natural than Nelly. Because Nelly destabilizes the signifiers of difference that support Mark's identity, the novel invokes scientific discourses to shore up the distinction between Mark and Nelly as homosexual types. By positioning conflicting accounts of the origin of homosexuality against each other, the novel establishes that Mark's Whitmanesque version of "manly love" is natural, while Nelly's effeminacy isn't. Nelly explains his "pathology" to the demanding judge in

the most reductive version of the Freudian narrative of homosexuality--his mother had wanted a girl when Nelly was born, and she let him dress like one and play like one, so he turned out to be gay.

This account of homosexuality is very different from the one that circulates around Mark, which looks to biological rather than psychological explanations for homosexuality. Mark reads sexologists such as Ellis, who suggested that the "primitive indifference" to homosexuality among the "lower" races and classes and among criminals was evidence that, in the absence of cultural interdiction, there existed among a small percentage of the population "a strong natural instinct impelling man toward homosexuality," and in the course of the novel, Mark meets a doctor who confirms the belief that homosexuality is congenital when he explains that cutting-edge research is leading to "the recognition of more than two hard and fast sex forms in man" (173).

Although the novel represents the congenital explanation for homosexuality as cutting-edge, the idea that homosexuality was environmentally or socially produced was actually more prevalent by the twenties (Simmons 56). It makes sense, however, that the novel would rely on earlier congenital explanations for homosexuality regarding characters for whom it wants to create sympathy, since sociological explanations made homosexuality "a



threatening, oppositional alternative to the heterosexual pattern" (Simmons 56), while the congenital explanation made homosexuality more like race by grounding it in biology. The idea that homosexuality was for the most part a biological defect rather than an acquired behavior was crucial to the call for tolerance in "advanced" Western societies. By claiming that "true" sexual inversion was a defect of only 2 percent of the population, it could be argued that "civilized sexual morality" produced an unnecessary intolerance of what was an essentially natural, and fortunately limited, phenomenon. Clearly, the novel is more comfortable representing Mark's cult of masculinity as natural than Nelly's visible signification of homosexual difference through markers of effeminacy.

While official discourses of sexuality--scientific, psychoanalytic, sociological, legal--are important to establishing the status of the white characters' sexuality, they are conspicuously absent in the novel's portrayal of black characters, who function through what JanMohammed terms the "condensing discursivity" of the symbolic:

In contrast the analytic imperative that underlies bourgeois sexuality, racialized sexuality is structured by a set of *allegorical* discourses: silence and repression weave a limited configuration of symbols and desires that are deeply resonant but never available to pseudo-scientific methods. Whereas bourgeois sexuality is a product of an empiricist, analytic and proliferating discursivity, racialized sexuality is a product of stereotype, symbolizing, and condensing discursivity. (105-6)

This condensing discursivity allows for a proliferation of contradictory images of black sexuality that is typical of the stereotype, which Bhabha describes as a structure that "is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse".<sup>8</sup>

The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces. (170)

The proliferation of contradictory images of black sexuality is especially evident in *Strange Brother's* representation of Sybil, who is introduced in the same scene at the Lobster Pot that gives us Nelly. Eric Garber suggests that Sybil is probably modeled after singer Gladys Bentley, who "personified the identifiable black lesbian stereotype of the period: the tough-talking, masculine acting, cross-dressing, and sexually worldly 'bull dagger'" (58). Ironically, however, in Niles' novel the analogy between racial difference and homosexuality is least examined in the figure of the black lesbian.

While she marks the visibility of a specific homosexual subculture, as does Nelly, in *Strange Brother* the black butch does not provoke the same anxiety as the white queen. The figurative language that describes her, the attention to her physiognomy, and the repetition of her name like a mantra all reinforce Sybil's status as the

symbol of a racist type--the primitive--that June finds charming:

"She looks like the heart of Africa . . . the heart of darkness! And the way she's dressed!" . . . . For Sybil's big feet wore old, down-at-the-heel, black oxford ties. Sybil's legs were in gray cotton stockings. A short tight black cloth skirt was stretched taut about Sybil's heavy thighs. A white blouse and dark coat clothed Sybil's shapeless torso. And set close to her shoulders was Sybil's head; with its protruding lower jaw, its flat receding brow, and its hair, oiled and brushed to an unnatural straightness, as though the hair were Sybil's one vanity. (41-42)

Because Sybil symbolizes the heart of darkness, then, her sexuality doesn't require analysis; she articulates (not verbally but inchoately in song) primal sexuality, which is associated with both the reproductive sexuality of the jungle and heterosexuality as June identifies it in her relationship with Seth. June thinks that Sybil's "cry was universal, the very birds and beasts cry for each other like that," and it makes June remember how her lover Seth touches her (43). Here Sybil stands for the affirmation of all sexualities subsumed under the sign heterosexuality.

Within the primitivist discourses of the novel, blacks repeatedly stand for an equation between naturalness and heterosexuality. This is articulated in the novel by Phil, June's naturalist cousin who studies bugs in the jungle, when he deplores the sexologists' study of homosexuality as unscientific. He, for one, is not interested in "freaks"; sex, he says, "is for the purpose of reproduction. Anything

else is a farce. . . .The great fecund jungle. That's sex. Any other conception of it is absurd" (178). Lest we miss the point, this is the same jungle where Phil has lain in his hammock listening to bare-breasted tribal women singing inchoate songs like Sybil's. But the black lesbian can affirm both heterosexuality and homosexuality precisely because her sexuality does not demand analysis; she can embody the contradictory logic of stereotypes according to which a) the construction of blackness as natural takes precedence over the construction of homosexuality as unnatural and b) the association of perversion with black sexuality makes homosexuality natural, not anomalous, for blacks anyway.

Further, the novel desexualizes Sybil as part of the process of making her represent sexuality as a universal urge, so that she becomes a racist type more than a sexual persona. By describing Sybil from June's point of view rather than Mark's, the novel enables a rereading of Sybil's sexual style in terms of class and race difference. Just as the naive June misreads the signs of Palmer's effeminacy, she will recontextualize Sybil's masculinity. Playing off the association of masculinity and the natural that we have seen in the representation of Mark as opposed to Nelly, the novel construes Sybil's masculinity as a lack of artifice rather than as a sexual style that is as constructed as Nelly's effeminacy. June sees Sybil as "just

an untidy fat woman," who sings her soul out and is not vain about her appearance; Sybil's oxfords and shapeless jacket aren't a sign of her mannishness but of her "simplicity" and working-class status. Sybil's straightened hair, the one indication of her "vanity," does not signify a specific sexual style, as does Nelly's blondined, marcelled hair. Whether we read it as the adaptation of a "white" hairstyle by an African-American or as the adaptation of a "masculine" hairstyle by a woman, Sybil's hair seems constructed as an anomalous, "unnatural" sign of artifice that is supposed to look out of place in order to heighten our perception of her as primitive; it is the one mark of culture on a body that is otherwise completely without artifice.

To represent Sybil as a butch with sexual power would suggest threatening alternatives to the failure of white heterosexual relationships in the novel. First, it would invest the black body with masculine sexual potency, something that novel is very careful not to do. The black men in the novel are, even more than Sybil, domesticated and desexualized; if the novel seems anxious about cross-racial sexual relationships with reference to Mark, it seems to deny even the possibility of cross-racial heterosexual desire. Ira, Glory's boyfriend, only speaks long enough to declare his sexual preference for black women, and Caleb, who visits June's apartment to break the

news of Mark's death, plays the domesticated happy ducky, reminiscing about the good old days on the Virginia plantation where he grew up to sooth June while she absorbs the shock of the tragedy.

Further, the way Sybil's sexual power is transferred to Seth suggests that the novel can only invoke lesbian sexuality in the most bracketed fashion, as when the novel momentarily invokes lesbian sexuality through contiguity with heterosexuality when Sybil's song stirs June's memory of sexual pleasure, but quickly shifts the idea of sexual potency from Sybil to Seth. This bracketing is perhaps most obvious in the way the novel portrays Amy, Sybil's wife, who embodies both the threat of interracial relationships and of lesbianism. She is framed and contained by the structures of representation, appearing only as frozen image in Mark's reference to a picture of the two women at their "imitation marriage ceremony." Mark describes Amy as "a beauty--what they call 'high-yellow' in Harlem. In the photograph, she's in a bridal veil and orange blossoms. Sybil is in a tuxedo" (156). The light-skinned, feminine lesbian represents the threat of passing on more than one level. As the bride in orange blossoms, Amy confuses the boundaries between black and white; her near-whiteness is heightened through proximity to the white blossoms and veil. Here, miscegenation becomes the symbolic but unarticulated paradigm for the disruption of the social

order that homosexuality explicitly articulates. For as the feminine, veiled bride who demands fidelity (indicated by her jealousy of other women at the Lobster Pot who might admire Sybil) and who wants to adopt a child, Amy also confuses the boundary between reproductive heterosexuality and homosexuality. Her feminine appearance and traditional "family values" define her as not quite lesbian, but her relationship with Sybil defines her as not straight, either.

This liminality and the threat of "passing" or appropriating white, heterosexual privilege is what threatens June most in Mark's account of "the life." In Mark's monologue, he explains his sense of being "a half-man," expresses his desire for an "entirely masculine" partner, and analyzes gay male promiscuity. But it is when Mark describes Amy that June begins to feel dizzy with the realization that homosexuality is "real" and "everywhere." The image of the veil associated with Amy's wedding photo is transposed into the novel's description of June's disorientation, and the sense of difference that triggers her disorientation is expressed in metaphors of darkness that conflate the threats of racial and sexual differences:

It was a dark place into which the tide of Mark's emotion had borne June. She felt also, for the first time, an impulse to close her eyes on the facts and go away to some bright light place where she might forget. For it seemed not only tragic but sinister. She felt mentally upside-down, as she had sometimes felt when waking in the night, she had not known for one dazed moment

where she was, or which way she lay in her bed, or where to locate familiar doors and windows . . . . She sat silent now, feeling as though she had been ushered into a mad-house, whose inmates contradicted all that had been most firmly established in the social order. . . . No, it was not a dream of madness, June realized. It was all fact. Quite suddenly the veil which separates the normal from the shadow world had been lifted, to let her pass in. (157-58)

And if June can pass into the shadow world, then it stands to reason that the shadow world might also pass into hers. The novel guards against this threat by using the very iconography that makes Amy so threatening to domesticate her, familiarizing her narratively the way it frames her in the picture. The novel recuperates the threat of passing that Amy represents through the narratives of heterosexual "normalcy" that make her dizzying to begin with; it is as if the novel asks, "If they want marriage and a family, doesn't that mean that homosexuals are just like us?"

Familiarizing the other by establishing similarity suggests not only that the other is like us, but that we are like the other; this begs the question then, of who "we" are in the novel, and how we are like "them." In *Strange Brother*, in which June's point of view frames the exploration of otherness, "we" is the white, heterosexual woman. The novel consciously intends to argue that June's tolerance of homosexuality is based on her understanding, as a heterosexual woman, of Mark's feminine desire for the masculine and not on any lesbian sexual desires she might harbor. I would argue that this intention is subverted by a



subtext of lesbian sexual desire that structures the novel even before June meets Mark and is officially introduced to the world of male homosexuality. The novel guards against lesbian panic here as it guards against Mark's panic over gay visibility elsewhere--by enacting forms of race and class privilege that mark the other's sexuality as performative. Just as the fairy's sexuality is marked as performative by contrasting his hyperfemininity with the "naturalness" of the masculine homosexual, the other woman's sexuality will be marked as performative by contrasting her excessive performance of femininity to June's more "natural" (i.e. white, upper-class) representation of femininity. For June, this representation of the other's difference will constitute a form of phallic power through which the other is constructed as lacking.

#### **Debutante In Harlem: Slumming as Phallic Power**

June's relationship with Mark not only provides her with an entree into the gay life, but also substitutes for relationships with women, which are non-existent in the novel. Christina Simmons suggests that the "fear of lesbianism constituted . . . a significant problem in the dominant heterosexual ideology of the 1920's and 1930's": "If women's sexual desires exhibited the urgency long attributed to men's, and if an intense love relationship seemed vital for personal happiness, then lesbian relationships were the logical result of the absence or

failure of heterosexuality" (4-5). Because heterosexuality does seem to be a failure in the novel, representing June's relationships with other women might uncomfortably raise that fear of lesbianism.

But the very opening scene of the novel invokes lesbian eroticism similarly to the way it is invoked in the scene describing Sybil, and in doing so it calls into question the primacy of heterosexuality by establishing what might be termed a lesbian phallic economy. As June watches the show at the Magnolia Club with Seth and Phil, she meditates on Glory, the black cabaret singer performing "The Creole Love Call," made famous in 1927 by Adelaide Hall, who probably served as a model for Glory just as Gladys Bentley served as a model for Sybil (Burton iii). The club scene makes Glory the site of both woman's desire for the phallus and of her concomitant signification of phallicism.<sup>9</sup> Glory stands "straight and slender" under a "brilliant shaft of light" and her voice rises from "the dark column of her throat"; she is a girl who can "make a man know joy" (10). But as June watches, she wonders if Glory "actually possess[es] all that she seems to have?"-- in other words, she wonders if Glory is really able to represent masculine desire well enough to fulfill it.

June projects herself into Glory's body to see "how it would feel. . . to give yourself to life . . . completely," playing out the primitivist fantasy of the black female

body as the site of sexual plentitude. As she fantasizes, the phallic signifiers shift from Glory to Seth, June's lover; June becomes aware of his presence, observing how big he is and the length of line from his hip to his knee (10). Here her fantasy about being Glory, waiting for a lover, is refigured as a fantasy about having Seth. But consider the erotics of the following passage, in which June imagines herself to be Glory:

She saw herself inhabiting a lithe brown body. She was wearing a scarlet negligee of soft chiffon; trailing, and with great transparent sleeves. She was lying back among heaped up pillows, with her brown arms raised, and her hands clasped behind her head. The sleeves floated away from her bare arms. Red silk mules dangled from her toes. She felt her whole body relaxed; her face relaxed; especially her lips relaxed.

She was waiting . . . for a lover who was certain to come. And nothing else mattered.

She felt languorous, and at the same time was aware of deep fires burning within her, waiting to leap into flame. (11)

In June's fantasy, Glory's Frederick's style lingerie and slippers emphasize a hyper-femininity attached to the woman of color, a hyper-femininity that signifies heterosexuality through its "being for" the masculine subject. But the phallicism of this scene also feels as if it excludes the masculine in its intense focus on female sexual desire. June's identification with Glory is eroticized in a way that doesn't seem entirely heterosexual. The fires ostensibly burn at the thought of the male lover, but it is Glory's clothes that caress June; they set up a sort of

contiguity between the two female subjects, a contiguity of touch in which the clothes rather than the penis are the fetishized representative of the phallus.

Both the structure and the language of this passage recall a similar scene from Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*, which has been read by feminist critics such as Deborah McDowell, Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler as a narrative of suppressed lesbianism.<sup>10</sup> Critics have argued that while Irene's simultaneous attraction and resistance to Clare is overtly about her discomfort with Clare's racial passing, it also signals a conflict of lesbian desire produced by "Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare" (McDowell xxxvi). Clare, like Glory in *Strange Brother*, is hyper-sexualized, and McDowell points out the highly eroticized language of Irene's descriptions of Clare: she is described as "exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting"; her "tempting mouth," "arresting eyes" and "seductive smile" give Irene the sense of being "petted and caressed."<sup>11</sup>

The scene that I want to focus on here in comparison to *Strange Brother* occurs towards the end of Larsen's novel, when Clare invites herself to a party with the Redfields. Irene begins to nurse a suspicion that her husband and Clare are having an affair--a suspicion that coincides with her own intensified attraction to Clare, leading critics to note that Brian seems to mediate female

homoeroticism at this point in the novel (McDowell xxix; Butler, *Bodies* 179). Brian's function as mediator and signifier of desire takes on a tangible form as the three walk to the party, and Irene feels "something in the air, something that had been between those two and would be again. It was like a live thing pressing against her" (Larsen 237). The phallicism here is unmistakable; what could this "live thing" be but the erect penis, the signifier of sexual desire that is absent from the Redfield's marriage?

But as in the scene from *Strange Brother*, where Seth serves as a pretext for June's erotic identification with Glory, phallicism does not necessarily signify heterosexuality. Both scenes can be said to invert, if you will, Eve Sedgwick's analysis of how "male-male desire bec[omes] intelligible primarily by being routed through triangular relations involving women" (*Epistemology* 15).<sup>12</sup> In my inversion of Sedgwick's triangle, man serves as a token of heterosexuality between women. In both *Strange Brother* and in *Passing*, the main character seems to see another woman as a rival for possession of masculinity (the phallus). But at the same time she eroticizes the other woman as the embodiment of a hyper-femininity, that, as I have argued, signifies both heterosexuality and another erotic economy--one that occurs between women and doesn't require men to provide the phallus. Metaphorically, at

least, we might think of this as a lesbian phallic economy. The production of this lesbian phallic economy might then be read as a realization of the fear that, given the inability of white men to provide the phallus in this novel, lesbianism would present itself as a viable alternative to the failure of heterosexuality.

I don't want to suggest here that the lesbian phallic economy is utopic; in fact the phallic economy set up in these scenes doesn't account for the way "hyper-femininity" is embodied as racial and class difference. So we need also to analyze how the other woman's femininity is marked as performative, and constructed as lacking. Drawing on Carol-Anne Tyler's analysis of feminist theories of mimicry and masquerade, we can read June's fantasy about Glory as enacting a form of power in which the white woman refuses lack (here the lack evoked by the prospect of a lesbian phallic economy) by "fetishistically projecting it on to the class, ethnic, or racial other, from whom [the middle-class white woman] distances herself through a dis-identification that takes the form of an apparent identification" (57). According to Tyler, white women can "distinguish themselves from 'other' women even as they assimilate the latter by romanticizing them, assuming that the 'other' has a critical knowledge about femininity because of her difference from what counts as natural femininity: white, Anglo, bourgeois style" (57).

We have already seen how the novel romanticizes Glory as the site of sexual plentitude that gives her the knowledge of "how to make a man know joy," precipitating June's erotic identification with the black woman. As Tyler suggests, this apparent identification is revealed to be a form of dis-identification in the way the novel distinguishes between June's femininity and that of the other woman. June's femininity appears effortless and seamless because it is white, upper-class, and tastefully Vogue. She is described as being:

Aristocratic in appearance . . . [with] small delicate features, a Dresden China complexion, and straight dark brows above eyes of the quality of Concord grapes, Blue-black and lustrous, veiled by quite incredibly long lashes.

Her hair was blonde, pale and shimmering gold; she wore it cropped, and carried her head triumphantly, as though she defied the Dresden China ladies. (18-19)

So June is white perfection updated; she is the bohemian New Woman of the twenties with the genetic inheritance of a beautiful Gilded Age debutante. Glory's femininity, on the other hand, is repeatedly marked as performative; she is orientalized, exoticized, and linked to the primitive through a series of costume changes that begins with a conversation between Seth, June's lover, and Phil, the insect specialist. As the two men watch Glory, who performs in a "white tulle and silver lace gown which [foams from her] chocolate brown shoulders down to her silver slippers, they imaginatively undress and redress her as the "native

woman" who isn't "wearing anything more than a strip of calico around her waist, a string of beads and some bracelets" (10-11).

The exchange suggests that on Glory, the evening gown is drag, much as Nelly's lipstick and powder are drag. Black women can only masquerade "real" femininity--in other words, blackness is the ground against which femininity can be seen as gendered performative. Consider, for example, the following scene from *Strange Brother*, in which June watches Glory's second performance at the cabaret:

The second revue came on. There was Glory again, this time in red and gold, with a great Spanish comb, and a mantilla of black lace. She was surrounded by a troupe of chorus girls, wearing striped silk scarves, like parti-colored wings, with a strange strip of violet among the simple red and blue and green, a single wide band of violet on each of the brilliant scarfs which waved and fluttered in a circle about the figure of Glory.

The revue moved quickly.

A beautiful dancer revolved around Glory. His crimson velvet trousers burned under the spotlight and as he whirled the lining of his black cape undulated, like a flame blown in the wind.

Tap dancers followed the vivid spectacle of the scarf dance.

A grotesquely made-up negro, with abnormally long shoes and abnormally exaggerated red lips, sang a song about jail, and while he sang he held under one arm a live white rooster with a bright red comb and wattles.

The negro was in turn replaced by a chorus of almost entirely nude girls, with great gorgeous feather head-dresses and feather wings. They entered slowly in single file; walking with majesty under their towering head-dresses, the golden flesh of their legs stepping forth against the background of their long feather trains. Flamingo girls. Red and yellow bird-of-paradise girls. Snow white swan girls. Bluebird girls.



[At this point there's a break where June meditates on Seth's desire for her. Then the final revue comes on:] "a group of laughing, prancing girls with loins cloths of iridescent metallic fabric. They did a wild dance to the blare of the great brass horn and the wail of the saxophones." (31-33)

Here racial difference is performed in a range of exotic female sexualities; Glory opens the show as Spanish dancer/harem girl, and is succeeded by other performers as bird girls and jungle savages. The implication is that all racially marked styles of female sexuality are appropriate to dark-skinned women, and that the only form of femininity not proper to them is the Western, Anglo-Saxon form that is the province of white women; Glory appears first in her evening gown only as an invitation to undress and redress her as various exotic others. And the novel even manages to contain the threat of that exoticism, the threat that it might represent masculine desire too enticingly, by giving us the man in blackface who sings with a rooster under his arm. His performance presumably allows the girls time for costume changes so that they can vary the spectacle of exotic eroticism, but it also recalls a more domesticated representation of sexual otherness that belongs to the comic, burlesque tradition of the minstrel stage and functions to render the threat of the other harmless through buffoonery.<sup>13</sup>

The novel also constructs femininity as performative in relation to class as well as racial difference when June

channels the thoughts of the white working-class woman at the club whose date has passed out in front of her. The girl touches up her makeup over the collapsed form of her date, and of course she has on too much of the wrong color and commits the unforgivable faux pas of plastering it on in public. To top it all off she returns her vanity case to a cheap rhinestone bag. Watching her, June imagines out loud, for Seth's benefit, the girl's excitement at finding the bag on special for \$2.95 at Sterns and how she thinks to herself that she can carry the bag often because "rhinestones go with anything" (25-26). June similarly appraises the outfit Glory wears to the Lobster Pot when the singer has shed her costumes: "She had a string of big white pearls about her throat; the sort of necklace that hangs in shop windows labeled, 'Choker, \$3.75'" (40).

These passages featuring Glory and the girl with the vanity case draw attention to how the working class and black woman too obviously commodify their sexuality by revealing the fact that their femininity is produced and performed through the use of makeup, costume, and mannerism.<sup>14</sup> June, on the other hand, has the ability to "craft a refined, legitimating sexual identity," where refined and legitimating mean artless--an artlessness, however, that you have to have the material capacity to produce.

One paradigm for this manufactured artlessness would be the "natural look" that cosmetics companies promoted in the late 1980's, selling products that created the illusion that you were not wearing makeup. The worst thing you could do was have the wrong base, one that did not blend with your own skin at the chin line and thus revealed that you were wearing makeup. Another, perhaps more academic paradigm, would be Marx's optic analogy for commodity fetishism from *Capital*. To explain how commodities take on value apart from their use-value, their functional status as products of labor, Marx describes how the moment of perception elides the physical process that produces it; when we look at an object, we perceive it "not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form as something outside the eye itself" (436). In the very act of perception, what we fail to see is how objects are produced, constructed by the gaze. Similarly, commodities conceal themselves as products of labor.

June, then, is successful as a commodity because she conceals the labor that produces her as a valuable object of exchange in the sexual marketplace. Glory and the working-class woman are unsuccessful versions of "the real thing" because they draw attention to their own commodification. In *Strange Brother*, the visibility of gender as a performative is predicated on the investment of racial and class difference with phallic significance that

invests the white woman with relative power. While Glory's apparent ability to be the phallus seems powerful as the novel opens, closer analysis reveals that June is never divested of white privilege, and that that privilege takes the form of phallic power. June "has" the power of the phallus, or takes up the power of the phallic posture, when she makes other women represent the phallus and lack for her.<sup>15</sup>

June's assumption of phallic power in the opening scenes of the novel supports what is clarified by a close reading of the novel--that it is not really interested in undermining the boundaries it seems to want to cross in its infatuation with otherness. Although *Strange Brother* may have been conceived as a novel sympathetic to homosexuals and large-minded about Harlemites in general, it consistently fetishizes race and class differences in order to mitigate its homophobia. This tension between the claim to tolerance and the fetishization of difference has implications for the novel's use of analogy to represent sexual and racial otherness. It suggests not only that analogies are based on reductive and partial forms of knowledge, but that while they appear to draw similarities and make connections, they actually "depend upon maintaining . . . the categories of difference, the notions of consistency" that ensure the privileged identities--whiteness, masculinity, class status--that the characters

affirm (Roof 236).<sup>16</sup> Given that, as Judith Roof puts it "all analogies are faulty," we might seek to avoid them--which seems unlikely--or, as Roof suggests, to "subvert them momentarily by being constantly aware of their terms and structure, by deliberately keeping them in constant flux, and by constantly shifting, redefining, or denying the categories" (234). I would add, however, that analogies are already in constant flux, and are themselves constantly shifting, redefining, and denying the very categories they invoke. In that they do so systematically, without our deliberation, they provide a useful map to the kind of hierarchies we implement in the name of tolerance and understanding, when we least expect to.

### Notes

1. Traditionally, analogy has been thought of as a form of translation involving the use of metaphoric thinking to explain the literal world through a process of comparison. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, the study of metaphor and analogy began to move towards a more constructivist approach, incorporating the notion that analogy not only expressed/explained the world as it already existed but also produced knowledge by shaping the way we perceive the world. The constructivist approach enabled a rethinking of the role of analogy in scientific discourses, which had been considered immune to figurative thought processes (Ortony 1). Scholars such as Nancy Stepan ("Race and Gender: the Role of Analogy in Science"), Sander Gilman (*Difference and Pathology*), Anita Levy (*Other Women*), Donna Haraway (*Primate Visions*) have recently drawn on constructivist understandings of analogy and metaphor to study the production of knowledge in scientific discourses on race and sexuality.

2. The current analogy between racial and sexual minorities is not unique in being implicated in the logic of racism. Theorists of analogy and metaphor have argued that as forms of knowledge, analogy and metaphor are partial and reductive. According to Max Black, an

influential proponent of the constructivist theory of metaphor, the metaphor or analogy consists of a primary subject, the subject that wants explanation (e.g. sexuality), and a secondary subject that serves as the basis for the explanation (e.g. racial difference). Analogy produces knowledge about the primary subject by drawing on a set of "associated implications" from the secondary subject and projecting them onto the primary subject (Black 28). If we consider the set of "associated implications" in terms of stereotype, the connections between the structure of analogy and the structure of racism become apparent; each requires that the production of knowledge be grounded at a level of symbolism or allegory that operates according to what Bhabha describes as the fetishistic structure of stereotype.

Also see Christopher L. Miller for an analysis of the relationship between allegory and fetishism that discusses the proliferation of contradictory images in structures of comparison (*Blank Darkness*, 130-38).

3. Although George Chauncey has noted the need for attention to the novels of this era and genre, to date there has been no critical work done on *Strange Brother*.

4. David R. Roediger dates a form of primitivism in America from the era following the Civil War: "the growing popular sense of whiteness represented a hesitantly emerging consensus holding together a very diverse white working class . . . part of that consensus derived from the idea that blackness could be made permanently to embody the preindustrial past that they scorned and missed" (152). His analysis of how primitivism consolidates working class white identity suggests that the study of primitivism in America has been class-biased in its traditionally focus on the primitivist aesthetic of the upper classes during the 1920s.

5. Donna Haraway points out the American Museum of Natural History's Roosevelt Memorial uses the iconography of Roosevelt's journey to Africa and the Amazon to establish the "truth of manhood" to regenerate "a miscellaneous, incoherent urban public threatened with genetic and social decadence, threatened with the prolific bodies of new immigrants, threatened with the failure of manhood" (*Primate Visions* 28-29).

6. See Rotundo for a discussion of the changing language of effeminacy from the early nineteenth to the late nineteenth century (271-2), and Chauncey for a discussion of how the effeminate homosexual became "the primary pejorative category against which male normativity was measured" (GNY 115).

7. Here I use the term "performative" to indicate the constructedness of gender identity. Judith Butler says that gender "is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Those practices of coherence consist of a set of norms that "operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity" ("Critically Queer" 22). When the subject approximates those norms "successfully," gender identity appears to be natural because it creates the effect of what Butler terms "gender uniformity"; when the subject fails to approximate those norms, gender identity becomes visible as performative because s/he disrupts the effect of gender uniformity.

8. This proliferation of contradictory images is also, as Marianna Torgovnick observes, consistent with primitivism, which makes of the primitive whatever it needs at the moment:

Those who study or write about the primitive usually begin by defining it as different from (usually opposite to) the present. After that, reactions to the present take over . . . . Is the present sexually repressed? Not primitive life--primitives live life whole, without fear of the body. Is the present promiscuous and indiscriminating sexually? Then primitives teach us the inevitable limits and controls placed on sexuality. (8)

9. According to Lacan, woman is said to be the phallus in that she appears as the phallus in order to reflect or represent masculine desire. See Judith Butler's explanation of Lacan on how women represent the phallus:

To be the Phallus is to be the "signifier" of the desire of the Other and to appear as this signifier. In other words, it is to be the object, the Other of a (heterosexualized) masculine desire, but also to represent or reflect that desire. This is an other that constitutes, not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration. For women to "be" the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to "embody" the Phallus. (*Gender Trouble* 44)

10. *Passing* tells the story of two women, Irene and Clare, girlhood acquaintances who meet by chance at a tea room atop an exclusive Chicago hotel where they are both passing for white to escape the summer heat and crowded

streets below. While Irene is passing for temporary convenience, having secured her position among the New York's black bourgeoisie through her comfortable if passionless marriage to Brian Redfield, a successful Harlem doctor, Clare has passed out of the black community completely by marrying a rich white man who can afford her the social and class status she lacked as a child. The novel steadily builds up the tension between the two women as Clare insistently attempts to renew her friendship with Irene in order to satisfy her need to return to the black community and still maintain her white identity at home, while Irene struggles with her simultaneous attraction to Clare and her resistance to Clare's dangerous disregard for the conventions of marriage and the color line.

11. Early criticism of the novel argued over which narrative, the racial or the sexual, the book was "really" interested in, but more recently it has argued that the "illegibility of blackness" in the story of passing and the "muteness of homosexuality" in the story of female friendship are interdependent (Butler, *Bodies* 175).

12. Sedgwick's study of nineteenth-century English literature expands on Levi-Strauss's explanation of how, in marriage, woman is an object of exchange between men, not one of the partners in the exchange. Sedgwick argues that the homosocial bonds which structured relations of exchange between men were distinguished from the taint of homosexuality by the presence of women, who functioned as a token of male heterosexuality.

13. For an analysis of white's relationship to the minstrel show as a type of performative difference, see Eric Lott's book *Love and Theft*.

14. In her article "In Search of 'The Real Thing,': Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women's Sexual Subjectivity in the United States, 1920-1940," Pamela S. Haag argues that the middle-class woman's "natural" sexual style was constructed in opposition to the commodified sexuality of the prostitute and the unrestrained sexuality of the "vulgar" classes: "the working-class girl--as defined by material status as well as by personal style--appears in a variety of discourses as the girl who cannot properly own her sexuality because she either cannot master her instincts or because she alienates and relinquishes her sexuality according to the rules of the market and economic pragmatism" (551). The idea that the working-class girl relinquishes her sexuality according to the rules of the market is especially evident in Niles' representation of the girl with the handbag.



15. Carole-Anne Tyler explains how fantasies of identification with the Other work within the phallic economy in her reading of transvestite pornography:

What is remarkable about these fantasies is their subject's fluid shifting not only of gender but also of racial and class identities in ways which simultaneously subvert and sustain phallic identifications complexly articulated through differences in gender, race, and class . . . . the fantasy of the "other" as phallic Other is not necessarily radical, since s/he may be phallic in exactly those terms a sexist, racist and classist symbolic legitimates, and the fantasizing subject may identify with that position of omnipotence and omniscience, rather than imagine s/he is excluded from it. (61-62)

Tyler's analysis can also explain how June "sustains phallic identifications.

16. My analysis of how the analogy functions to ensure difference is indebted to Judith Roof's "All Analogies Are Faulty: The Fear of Intimacy in Feminist Criticism" from *A Lure of Knowledge*. In this chapter, Roof examines how feminist anthologies use analogy to establish distance between white, heterosexual academic feminism and its others while making claims for diversity.

## Chapter 4

### Strategies of Identification in Three Narratives of Female Development

"This is the vision of Jane Eyre, small and pale. She is speaking of us. We dwell in the penumbra of the eclipse. In the half-darkness. They tell us the dark and light lie beyond us. 'I feel sorry for you,' the dark woman said. 'You don't know who you are.'"

Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an  
Identity They Taught Me to Despise*

In the previous chapters I have attempted to suggest how issues of visibility and identity are linked by showing that the construction of identity relies on the repudiation of differences that have been marked as other within economies of the visible. At this point, I want to focus more specifically on how the act of identification itself hinges on structures of visibility, and to shift attention from the moment of disavowal, when identification is refused, to the moment of recognition, when identification is desired. In some way, identification, or perhaps more properly, disidentification, has been central to how the texts I have read to this point raise issues of visibility. In each, there is a moment when, in order to reconstitute unstable boundaries between self and other, the subject refuses identification by constructing the other's difference as visible or marked: in *The Well of Loneliness*, Stephen refuses identification with the feminine, marked by whiteness, in order to consolidate her masculine identity;

in *Invisible Man*, identification between the narrator and the blonde, and between the narrator and young Emerson, fails because the characters alternately fetishize and refuse the visibility of race, gender, and homosexual differences; in *Strange Brother*, Mark refuses identification with the working-class fairy's effeminacy in order to consolidate his masculine, middle-class homosexual identity, and June guards against lesbian erotic identification by marking the other woman's femininity as performative.

In this chapter I argue that the moment of repudiation that these texts represent, in which visible difference emerges as what disrupts identification, is grounded in opposition to a fantasy of pure identification that does not evoke issues of visibility because it is located in the realm of sameness rather than difference. This fantasy is not obviously articulated in the novels, but I would suggest that the texts assume that there is some ideal moment of identification that is uninterrupted by difference that exists in contrast to the moments of failed and disrupted identification they represent to explore issues of visibility and difference,

The fantasy of pure identification is evident even in neo- and post-colonial theory that historicizes structures of identification by analyzing how they work within the discourses of colonialism. Perhaps the best

example of how post-colonial criticism grounds its reading of disrupted identification against a moment of pure identification is Homi Bhabha's reading of Fanon's "primal scene" of identification, which I first brought up in my discussion of Ellison to illustrate the violent dislocation of the black subject's identity from the marked body. I would like to recall that scene, in which a "white girl fixes Fanon in a look and a word as she turns to identify with her mother": "'Look, a negro . . . Mamma, see the Negro! I'm frightened. Frightened'" (Bhabha 163), to more fully examine the moment of pure identification that grounds Bhabha's analysis of how that dislocation takes place.

Bhabha's work, which very usefully reconstructs psychoanalytic narratives of identity formation in terms of racial difference, represents the girl's identification with her mother as being unmarked by the social structures of racial difference even as it uses the narrative of her identification to theorize that difference. In Bhabha's reading of the scene, which shows "how the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized are bound in a Lacanian mirror-image, and the identities of both subjects constructed within that colonial moment" (Azim 5), the daughter returns to an Imaginary wholeness in which racial difference can be disavowed because it doesn't exist between mother and child: "the girl's gaze returns to her mother in

recognition and disavowal of the negroid type . . . In the act of disavowal and fixation the colonial subject is returned to the narcissism of the Imaginary and its identification of an ideal-ego that is white and whole" (Bhabha 163). In this scenario, the daughter's identification with the mother successfully denies visible difference because it returns her to a realm that is prior to difference. Presumably, though, all identification is threatened by difference, because the process of identification is itself enacted precisely to refuse the sight of differences that already exist. This, after all, is Bhabha's premise when he takes the Freudian account of gender difference, which is based in the realm of the scopic, as the paradigm for the colonial stereotype as "an arrested, fetishistic mode of representation within its field of identification" (163).<sup>1</sup>

Bhabha's situation of the mother/daughter dyad as the locus for the fantasy of pure identification suggests how *female* identification, in particular, is overdetermined as sameness. In psychoanalytic accounts of subject-formation, the girl's primary identification with her mother is positioned in the mirror-stage, prior to the Oedipal narrative of development.<sup>2</sup> In the mirror-stage, as Bhabha's reading of Fanon shows, the child responds to the sense of lack that accompanies the recognition of difference by seeking an imaginary wholeness with the

mother--mother and child strive to fill the "impossible lack in/of the other" (Grosz 46-7). The mother-daughter dyad is especially resonant for this imaginary wholeness because the category of resemblance is thought to structure that same-sex relationship more intensely than the mother-son relationship. For example, Mary Jacobus explains that Luce Irigaray "figures the relationship between mother and daughter as one of specular entrapment: 'I look at myself in the mirror ("glace") of resemblance ("I look like you, you look like me"), the daughter can only see the mother as a petrifying image of in-difference'" (280). In assuming that the mother-daughter relationship is structured around resemblance, psychoanalysis relegates daughter's primary identification with her mother to the space of the precultural where it is presumed to be "completely uninflected by the cultural markers associated with secondary identification" that takes place after the child's entry into the Oedipus complex (Fuss, "Freud's Fallen Woman" 58-59).

This chapter reads three related novels that variously represent the desire for identification across boundaries of visible difference: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*. *Jane Eyre* (1847), perhaps the best-known female *Bildungsroman* in English literature, has become one of the cult texts of feminist criticism. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, written in 1966 by

Jean Rhys, a white West Indian, gives voice to the other woman silenced in Brontë's novel by telling the story of Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife from the West Indies. In both criticism and the classroom, *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are commonly paired to illustrate how a feminist critique of imperialism develops in the movement from representing the British white female subject to representing the (still white female) colonized West Indian subject.<sup>3</sup>

Abeng (1984) extends the critique of colonial patriarchy by reconstructing a narrative of lesbian sexual awakening from the earlier novels, foregrounding alternative sexual economies and anxieties about heterosexuality that are incipient in the apparently heterosexual narratives of female development in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*.<sup>4</sup> Cliff's autobiographical/fictional novel tells the story of Clare Savage, a light-skinned but "not quite/not white" creole girl coming of age in Jamaica in 1958, four years before "Independence." Focusing on Clare's romantic attachment to her darker-skinned friend Zoe, the novel traces how, in the context of Jamaica's history of colonialism, intersecting discourses of race, class, and gender affect relationships between women of color(s). By drawing on the narrative structures of the earlier novels to write a lesbian Bildungsroman, *Abeng* opens up the possibility of rereading the first two novels

in terms of the connection between the desire for identification across boundaries of visible differences and the emergence of the "lesbian novel."

To a certain extent, the novels I read in this chapter follow the paradigm I outline in my analysis of Bhabha. As in psychoanalysis, female identification circles around the figure of the mother in *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *Abeng*, and in provisional and unstable ways, the novels do invoke the fantasy of imaginary wholeness in response to the threat of visible difference. But in contrast to Bhabha's reading of Fanon, the novels critique the moment that Bhabha describes, in which "the subject turns around the pivot of the 'stereotype' to return to a point of total identification," because they do not represent an originary point of total identification to return to. In *Abeng* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* especially, the mother is neither white nor whole because her identity is fragmented by categories of racial difference, and the books are about the failure of identification that the mother's already fragmented identity produces for the daughter.

In all three novels the recognition of difference associated with the mirror-stage is articulated in terms of visible racial difference that disrupts the scene of primary identification and results in the failure of the mother-daughter relationship. Daughters respond to maternal rejection by identifying with women who represent mother-



substitutes. In representing the daughter's relationships with these women, the novels replay the scene of mirror-stage identification at points chronologically later than it occurs in the psychoanalytic narrative of subject-formation--first during childhood in response to the failure of the primary mother-daughter relationship that triggers the heroine's struggle to establish her own identity, and again in response to the onset of menstruation, which marks the girl's eligibility for entrance into the heterosexual economy of adulthood, marriage and childbearing.

The interjection of the social into the mirror-stage leads us to a critique of psychoanalysis and a revised view of the relationship between race and sexuality. By replaying the scene of female identification *within* the narrative of socio-sexual development (whereas psychoanalysis posits it as prior to the Oedipal narrative of subject-constitution that marks the child's entrance into the realm of the social) the novels sexualize female identification, narrativizing it as lesbian. While this narrative of lesbian identification is muted in *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Abeng* foregrounds it by reconstructing the narrative patterns of the earlier novels to emphasize how the eroticized desire for female identification is connected to the increasing fragmentation of identity.

I would suggest that lesbian narratives become the vehicle for exploring the desire for identification in these novels because lesbianism itself is culturally constructed as identification/resemblance. To begin with, homosexuality in general is coded as the desire for sameness ("like to like"). Further, because homosexuality is conceived as a desire to return to the moment of primary identification, lesbianism in particular evokes that primordial signifier of mirroring, the mother-child dyad, as a category of resemblance, because mother and daughter are the same sex.<sup>5</sup> Lesbianism, then, can be thought of as being doubly coded as a trope for pure identification. Because lesbianism is so overdetermined as identification, it can be the place where the desire for identification is explored as an alternative to the impulse toward disidentification. But whereas psychoanalytic narratives of lesbian sexual development locate lesbianism, as an act of primary identification, prior to the realm of the social, the novels, as I have suggested above, read the visibility of racial difference back into female identification and so return it to the realm of the social. By returning female identification to the realm of social, the novels are able to critique the fantasy of pure identification even as they invoke it.

The novels highlight the tension between the privatizing quality of the fantasy of pure identification

and the insistence of the social by replaying the scene of female identification in conjunction with the onset of menses, either literal or figurative, which marks the girl's sexualization within the narrative pattern of female development. In each of the novels, the onset of menstruation occurs in (or is associated with) the socialized environment of school, where romantic friendships between women signal the transference of the daughter's desire for a sheltering relationship with the mother to another figure when the mother refuses her, indicating a movement away from the privatized arena of the mother/daughter relationship to a more public arena of female socialization.<sup>6</sup> Within the sexualized narrative pattern of the novels, then, menstruation/school is a trope with a double valence; on the one hand it signifies pleasurable unions with other women, the romantic friendships of adolescence, and on the other it (re)marks the girl's sexual difference, signifying her own potential motherhood, and therefore her eligibility to enter the heterosexual economy of marriage and reproduction.

Because school is so central to how the novels work through fantasies of female identification related to the mother, this chapter looks at a series of scenes of mothers and daughters, girls' schools, and female communities where women's intellectual activities are an issue. In focusing on how identification is eroticized in these all-female

environments, I am aware of the danger that my analysis will lose sight of how race disrupts the category of resemblance that structures the fantasy of identification. This is especially true for my reading of *Jane Eyre*, which, more than the later two novels, works through a strategy of disidentification to consolidate identity; thus, in *Jane Eyre* difference is almost invisible--it is often rendered through image and metaphor rather than signified on the body.

But one of the points I want to make in stressing the erotics of female identification is that as the narrative of lesbianism develops from one novel to the next, race emerges more explicitly as that which informs the desire for identification. In reconstructing *Jane Eyre* to give voice to Bertha Mason, *Wide Sargasso Sea* places Brontë's figurative representations of racial difference and colonialism in the context of what Meyer terms the historical or "non-figurative reality of British race relations" that *Jane Eyre* displaces (250). Rather than working through a strategy of disidentification, *Wide Sargasso Sea* works through a strategy of failed identification, showing how the desire for identifications across categories of racial identity is disrupted by visible difference. In Rhys's novel, the white Creole's ambiguous racial status makes her both the figure for that desire, in that she is the locus of discourses about race

mixing, and the figure for the impossibility of that desire, in that she is the locus of discourses about racial purity. Rhys thus replays the scene of the mirror-stage more explicitly in terms of racial difference, which will most obviously and painfully mark the difference between mother and daughter in *Abeng*.

*Abeng* moves to an increasingly fragmented concept of identity, but unlike *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in the post-modern novel, fragmentation does not have to lead to disintegration for the heroine. In Cliff's novel difference is most visibly that which disrupts the heroine's identification with other women, and most visibly that which informs her desire for other women. But whereas in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Tia, the most explicitly racialized figure for desire disappears as the narrative of female development becomes more sexualized, and only returns imaginatively at the end of the novel with the death of the white Creole heroine, in *Abeng*, that figure is carried through the increasingly sexualized narrative; she not only remains the figure for desire, but she becomes what Judith Butler would term the novel's "phantasmic" resolution to the problem of identification. In borrowing Butler's terminology, which defines all identifications as phantasmic in that they "belong to the imaginary; they are phantasmic efforts of alignment, loyalty, ambiguous and cross-corporeal cohabitation," I want to describe how *Abeng*

most clearly maps out how visibility structures the tension in all three novels between the desire for identification and the impossibility of identification (*Bodies* 105).

### ***Jane Eyre* and the Strategy of Disidentification**

Initially, *Jane Eyre* seems least likely to offer much in the way of a reading for patterns of female identification, either within the mother-child relationship or later in the narrative of female development. Biological mothers are conspicuously absent from orphan Jane's story, and the novel seems to want to propel her into marriage. Further, her progress toward the fulfillment of the heterosexual narrative is repeatedly enabled by her disidentification with a series of other women. Traditionally *Jane Eyre* has been read as the ur heterosexual romance novel, and certainly the passionate intensity of Jane's relationship with Rochester appeals at the level of romantic fantasy.

But to privilege the heterosexual love story is to refuse other familial and erotic economies that exist in the novel, economies that are structured around female identification. This refusal is enacted most obviously in criticism that actively resists the argument represented by Adrienne Rich's essay "*Jane Eyre: The Temptations of a Motherless Woman*" (1973), which is perhaps the most famous reading of the novel by a "known lesbian." Rich looks for how the novel depicts alternatives to enforced heterosexuality and the stereotype of female rivalry, but

later critics have implied that while Rich's reading shouldn't be ignored, it misses the real point of the novel, which is to mirror the desire of "many readers, including feminists" for "the bubble of bliss promised by [heterosexual] romantic love" (Wyatt 39), and that its "denial of centrality to the love story expresses discomfort with female [hetero] sexuality and desire (Azim 103). As my bracketed terms indicate, both critics equate love and sexuality with heterosexuality.

While these critics allow that *Jane Eyre* represents both heterosexual and alternative erotic and familial economies, they do not go beyond conceding that there is more than one way to read a book. I would argue, on the other hand, not only that it is possible to read the novel for those alternative economies, but that the heterosexual plot structure of Jane's subject-constitution depends on a counter-narrative of female identification, even as it demands its expulsion in order to realize the goal of that plot--Jane's marriage to Rochester. Because it is so intent on consolidating Jane's identity, *Jane Eyre*, more than the later novels, represents the fantasy of pure identification that is based on resemblance and denies visible difference. But within the counter-narrative of female identification, *Jane Eyre* sometimes invokes the fantasy of pure identification and then undercuts it by positioning visible difference as that which disrupts it, and sometimes invokes

the desire for identification across boundaries of visible difference and then mitigates the threat of that desire to Jane's identity by returning to the fantasy of pure identification. In both cases, the instability of that fantasy, which is evident from the beginning of the novel, is emphasized.

The narrative structure which I have identified as being common to all three novels, in which menstruation/school is positioned between scenes of maternal rejection and female identification on the one hand, and enforced heterosexuality on the other hand, exists in microcosm in the very first chapters of the novel. The novel opens with Jane "shrined in the double retirement" of the scarlet-draped window seat with a book, sheltered from the hostile arena of the nuclear family from which she has been excluded by Mrs. Reed, who does not regard Jane as one of her children. The failure of this surrogate mother-daughter relationship is metaphorically represented in terms of racial difference. Jane is "a heterogeneous thing" an "alien" whom Mrs. Reed cannot abide because Jane is "an interloper, not of her race."<sup>7</sup>

To compensate for her ostracism, Jane has recreated the sense of maternal intimacy in the curtained space of the window-seat. The books she peruses remind her of Bessie, the closest thing she has to a sympathetic mother-figure, whom Jane associates with rare moments of feeling



nurtured when Bessie tells the children her own feminized versions "of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and older ballads," and from popular novels such as *Pamela*, as she crimps lace frills. Jane's contentment is short-lived. John Reed invades her sanctuary and reclaims her book in the name of the father; he hurls it at her and strikes her head, making her bleed. As Elaine Showalter has argued, the incident signals both the onset of menstruation and the intrusion of patriarchy into the enclosed feminine space (113-17). Figurative menstruation is followed by a replay of maternal rejection as Mrs. Reed banishes Jane to the red room, where Jane is alienated from her own image in the mirror; she perceives herself as visibly different, "one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming out the lone, ferny dells in moors" (2.47). In response to maternal refusal, Jane fantasizes that her uncle, who died in the red room, might have loved her. But the fantasy of patriarchal intervention becomes threatening when Jane imagines that the spirit of her uncle appears to her in "a rushing of wings" reminiscent of Zeus raping Leda in his embodiment as a swan.

The opening scenes anticipate the impossibility of sustaining female identification, which will be repeatedly interrupted in the novel by the demands of patriarchal culture. But the opening scenes also establish that there

is never an uncompromised moment of female identification that exists prior to that interruption. Jane's relationship with Bessie is hardly idyllic. In the same way that Jane's relationship with Mrs. Reed is marked by racial difference, her relationship with Bessie is marked by class conflict. Bessie is given to reminding Jane of her inferior social status as a dependant in the Reed household, and the novel will tell the story of Jane's resistance to being designated a dependant. To identify with Bessie would be to acquiesce to a class status that Jane will rise above in the course of the novel.

While *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Abeng* will show daughters trying to form alliances across boundaries of class and racial differences and will suggest that the failure of identification to secure these relationships produces problems with identity formation, Jane solidifies her identity by resisting identification with women and by defining herself in opposition to a series of female figures, both "good" and "bad" who represent forms of economic and sexual acquiescence that Jane will refuse.<sup>8</sup> These figures are racially coded in that the "bad figures" who threaten Jane's desire for family, beginning with Mrs. Reed, and continuing through Jane's rivals, Blanche Ingram, Blanche's mother, the Dowager Lady Ingram, and Bertha Mason, are all described as large and dark-skinned with "dark and inflated" or "Roman features." In an immediate

sense, Jane learns what not to do by the examples of Rochester's darker lovers, Céline Varens, Blanche Ingram, and Bertha Mason. She understands that even if she lives with Rochester in a *whitewashed* villa on the shores of the Mediterranean, she will be marked as sexually impure, covered with the "grimy dishonour" that Rochester associates with his foreign mistresses. On a more ideological plane, the novel uses discourses of racial difference to develop the feminist critique of patriarchy that consolidates Jane's identity. Jane refuses to be adorned by Rochester as a sultan would adorn his "harem inmates" (24.297), and refuses to become his "English Céline Varens."<sup>9</sup> Racial difference, then, structures Jane's disidentification with these women.

On the other hand, the women who provide Jane with familial affection and support, such as Helen Burns, Miss Temple, and Mary and Diana, are all fair-complected with "refined features" and large, "clear fronts" and well-defined eyes that, according to nineteenth-century race science, indicate their intelligence. In keeping with the structure of resemblance that will enable moments of positive identification in the novel, physical descriptions of Jane for the most part align her with the good mothers: Helen says that she reads "a sincere nature in [Jane's] ardent eyes and on [her] clear front" (8.101); Bessie remarks that Jane is "no beauty" but looks like "a lady"

(10.123); and Jane is described as being small and pale in contrast to the large dark women like Blanche and Bertha.

Ultimately, it is Jane's disidentification with all of these women that will propel her forward through the narrative of "the female subject-under-construction" (Azim 101). In *Jane Eyre*, the progress of that narrative seems to follow the itinerary of heterosexuality, and Pauline Nestor has argued that female identification, even in relation to the "good" figures, is associated with stasis, regression, stagnation and immersion because it stalls the forward movement of the heterosexual narrative impetus of Jane's development (Nestor, *Jane Eyre* 41). But if we shift our focus to look at how the narrative of heterosexual development demands a counter-narrative of female identification, we can argue not only that female identification impedes the heterosexual narrative, but also that the heterosexual disrupts female identifications that are desired, and even eroticized.

The first scene of such eroticized identification takes place at Lowood, the charity school for girls where Jane is befriended by Miss Temple and Helen Burns. In the Lowood scenes, identification obviously depends on resemblance: Jane clearly admires Miss Temple's manners, sympathies, and interests, and tries to model herself after Helen, who takes Miss Temple's example of Christian deportment to the extreme of martyrdom.<sup>10</sup> Jane first

identifies with Helen when she finds her reading during breaks in the garden. This "occupation" strikes "a chord of sympathy" with Jane, whom we first met reading to escape the oppressiveness of her family life with the Reeds in the opening chapters of the novel. Helen's choice of reading material, Samuel Johnson's oriental tale *Rasselas*, can be analyzed in terms of its consistency with Helen's obsession with the after-life and the Heavenly Father--an obsession that will mark her difference from Jane, and compel Jane to disidentify with Helen as a role-model. Traditionally, *Rasselas* has been read as a religious parable whose meditations on "the choice of life" point ultimately to the "choice of eternity."<sup>11</sup> But I would suggest that *Rasselas* might also be read in ways that show Helen to be coded more complexly than just as Christian martyr; she may also stand for the unsustainable fantasy of a women's community.

Johnson's representation of harem life and of female desire for communities of educated women provide context for reading the Lowood episodes of *Jane Eyre* for representations of female communities as an alternative to marriage and governessing, the two main options for women in Jane's social position.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the passages in *Rasselas* about the marriage debates, about Pekuah's captivity in an Arab tyrant's harem, and about Pekuah and Nekayah's ultimate decisions regarding the choice of life signal *Jane Eyre's* interest in the idea of school as a

female community. In the marriage debates, Nekayah argues with her brother that marriage is not a means of happiness but "one of the innumerable modes of human misery" (xxviii.212). She resists the argument about biological imperative (people must marry in order to preserve the reproduction of the species) that Rasselas puts forth, telling him that "How the world is to be peopled is not my care and needs not be yours . . . we are not now inquiring for the world but for ourselves" (213). Imlac interrupts the conversation and suspends the argument, but *Rasselas* spins out the threads of the debate, meditating on alternatives to marriage in the episodes involving Pekuah's kidnapping. Upon losing Pekuah, Nekayah resolves to withdraw to a cloister; her choice of celibacy suggests that marriage cannot replace relationships between women.

The harem episodes introduce the idea of female community. Nekayah interrupts Pekuah's narrative of her captivity to observe "There were women in your Arab's fortress," and then to ask, "why did you not make them your companions, enjoy their conversation, and partake their diversions?" (xxxix.234). Pekuah explains that women aren't fit companions because they are uneducated: "the diversions of the women were only childish play, by which the mind accustomed to stronger operations could not be kept busy" (234).<sup>13</sup> This commentary on the undereducation of women informs the "choices" that the female characters make at

the end of the novel: Pekuah wants to establish a convent and "to fill it with pious maidens, and to be made prioress of the order" (xliv.256), and Nekayah wants "to found a college of learned women in which she would preside" (256). *Rasselas* appears to offer an alternative to marriage as the resolution of the female narrative of development, but finally it suspends the question of marriage when it dictates that these women's communities will not be created because none of the characters can realize their "choices of life."

Whereas *Rasselas* doesn't specify why the characters can't realize their choices, *Jane Eyre* makes it clear that the narrative of compulsory heterosexuality interrupts women's relationships with each other. Like a harem, Lowood is presided over by a despotic man, Mr. Brocklehurst. But Jane discovers in Miss Temple and Helen a "sympathy," both intellectual and emotional, that is charged with maternal/erotic feeling.<sup>14</sup> Miss Temple represents a sort of nurturing but distant maternal figure. As she approaches the girls one evening, she is associated with the moon, which will recur as a figure for the mother/goddess later in the novel: "[the moon's] light, streaming in through a window near, shone full both on us and on the approaching figure, which we at once recognized as Miss Temple" (8.102). Miss Temple both attends to and withholds from her charges. Jane observes that there is about her something

that "precluded deviation into the ardent, the excited, the eager: something which chastened the pleasure of those who looked on her and listened to her, by a controlling sense of awe"--she is cold, marble (8.104). But Helen Burns, as her name suggests, is passionate. Her intellectual/spiritual rapture is depicted in eroticized language:

something . . . had roused the powers within her. They woke, they kindled: first, they glowed in the bright tint of her cheek . . . then they shone in the liquid lustre of her eyes, which had suddenly acquired a beauty more singular than that of Miss Temple's--a beauty neither of fine colour nor long eyelash, nor pencilled brow, but of meaning, of movement, of radiance. Then her soul sat on her lips, and language flowed, from what source I cannot tell; has a girl of fourteen a heart large enough, vigorous enough to hold the swelling of a pure, full, fervid eloquence? (8.105)

If Miss Temple's distance precludes the kind of passion that Jane seems to crave, Jane does experience the physical intimacy that she craves with Helen in a scene that evokes the eroticism of the mother-daughter relationship. When Jane seeks out the sick Helen, she finds her in a crib close by Miss Temple's bed, "half covered with its white curtains" (9.112). She hesitates before advancing past the curtain, but on Helen's invitation, joins her in bed and wraps her arms around her neck; the two whisper before falling asleep together.

The impossibility of sustaining the pleasures of such intimacy is underscored even as it is depicted, though, for



the sleeping Jane embraces Helen only on her deathbed. And here again, school is the site of both pleasurable unions with women and of the dissemination of patriarchal ideologies. Not only is Lowood supervised by Mr. Brocklehurst, who delimits the girls' lives by demanding that any evidence of their femininity, even curls and braids, be removed, but Jane's relationships with both Helen and Miss Temple are interrupted by narratives of heterosexuality. Helen leaves Jane to go to God The Father, and Miss Temple leaves Jane to marry a clergyman.

The structural pattern through which heterosexuality interrupts Jane's maternal/erotic identification with women is replayed around the scene of Jane's impending wedding, linking Bertha Mason, Jane's rival, and Adèle, Jane's pupil, to the series of other women who precede them in the text. Jane's relationship with Bertha is usually read almost purely in terms of a negative identification that is marked by their visible difference from each other.<sup>15</sup> But during the incident that occurs before Jane's wedding, in which Bertha puts on Jane's bridal veil and stands before the mirror, Bertha visually represents the identification between Jane and her dark others that Jane herself has refused throughout the novel.<sup>16</sup> Further, this moment of identification is charged with a kind of eroticism that recalls, literally in a darker form, the rapturous, fiery intensity of Helen's face when her "powers" are "roused."

And in the horrified description of Bertha as she hovers over Jane's bed in the gesture of a mother checking on a sleeping child, there is something at once nurturing and sexual, protective and threatening:<sup>17</sup>

Just at my bedside the figure stopped: the fiery eyes glared upon me--she thrust up her candle close to my face, and extinguished it under my eyes. I was aware her lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness: for the second time in my life--only the second time--I became insensible with terror. (25.312)

The allusion here to the moonlit red-room, the site of Jane's first loss of consciousness and her figurative menarche, suggests that this scene also is a moment of figurative menstruation that marks Jane's liminal position between the worlds of female community and heterosexuality. If female community is represented here by Bertha, then the text has invoked an erotic identification between the white woman and her other that threatens to collapse Jane's identity. To mitigate the threat of such an identification, the novel plays out the pattern of disidentification with the other who is visibly different through a return to the fantasy of pure identification that Bhabha describes in his reading of Fanon.

The novel acts out this scenario by taking Bertha's association with the menstrual/lunar cycle and splitting her into two figures for the mother, one light and one dark, that embody the ambivalence about the maternal and female identification that runs throughout the novel. Through the red moon, Bertha is associated with bad dark

mothers such as Mrs. Reed and the Ingrams, whose passions are not tempered and who are greedy and sexual. She represents anxieties about the violence of the mother/daughter relationship, which Mrs. Reed captures when she looks on Jane as being "a compound of virulent passions, mean spirit, and dangerous duplicity"--a description that the reader is meant to understand applies to Mrs. Reed more than to Jane (2.49). Read in this light, the novel's ultimate expulsion of Bertha signifies the expulsion of the violent and passionate aspects of the maternal.

This expulsion of the other coincides with the desexualization of maternal/erotic identification that emerges in the Lowood chapters, and with manifestation of the white moon goddess to replace the bad mother associated with the red moon. Following Bertha's bedside visitation, Rochester requests that Jane spend the night with her pupil Adèle ("there is room enough in Adèle's little bed for you" [25.313]). As in Bhabha's analysis, then, Jane turns away from the specter of difference to identify with a child who mirrors her, seeming to be "the emblem of [her] past life" (25.314). The refusal of difference enacted here is compounded by the fact that Adèle, as the daughter of Celine Varens, the French actress who was Rochester's debauched lover following the disintegration of his marriage with Bertha, is part of a long line of other women

whose otherness is marked by visible difference; Adèle's status as other must be elided in order to facilitate this ideal moment of identification.

In recasting the Lowood scene of the young girl in the older one's arms, the novel also drains the relationship of the passionate affection we see between Helen and Jane. Jane looks at Adèle, whom she is fond of but not strongly attached to, and sees the "slumber of childhood--so tranquil, so passionless, so innocent" (25.313). There is a tension between this representation of childhood as passionless (which seems ironic in light of the fact that Jane was all emotion as a child and Adèle is all coquette), and the scene where Jane parts from Adèle in the morning, which represents the strength of Adèle's (even unconscious) bond to and hold on Jane:<sup>18</sup>

I remember Adèle clung to me as I left her: I remember I kissed her as I loosened her little hands from my neck; and I cried over her with strange emotion, and quitted her because I feared my sobs would break her still sound repose.  
(25.314)

The discrepancy between the characterization of childhood as passionless, on the one hand, and the imagery of intense bonding that suffuses Jane's regret at leaving Adèle, who represents Jane's youthful relationships with women, on the other hand, suggests that in this novel, the narrative of heterosexuality must deny or expel the erotic elements of female bonding. This is consistent with the ensuing apparition of the mother as a ghostlike figure of the moon

in "white human form" that appears to Jane in a dream on what was to have been her wedding night and whispers to her, "My daughter, flee temptation" (27.346). Pauline Nestor points out that Bertha's visitation is "paradoxically akin to the mediation of [this] natural, maternal force in warning against the impending marriage" (1985 108). But in this apparition, the figure of Bertha/the maternal is "purified"--no longer associated with the blood-red moon, she is desexualized and whitened.

Having reconstituted the threatening other as safe by desexualizing and whitening her, the explicitly racialized figure drops out of the narrative, and the novel will maintain the category of resemblance within female identification as it moves toward the resolution of the heterosexual plot. That the narrative of heterosexuality in *Jane Eyre* demands the expulsion of female identification is emphasized in the Moor House chapters which follow Jane's flight from the bigamous marriage with Rochester. Here, as in the Lowood chapters, the idea of school signifies both the desire for a community of intellectual women and the dissemination of patriarchal ideologies. Near death after days on the moors, Jane arrives at Moor House and peers in the window at two women reading, a scene that recalls earlier scenes of Helen and Jane reading. Rich notes that these "unmarried bluestockings [who] delight in learning" "bear the names of the pagan and Christian aspects of the

Great Goddess--Diana or Artemis, the Virgin huntress, and Mary, the Virgin Mother"; while Nestor reads the references to virginity as encoding "a refusal to see maternity linked with sexuality," Rich emphasizes the woman-centeredness of Jane's bonds with the sisters who embrace her, implying perhaps that the refusal of heterosexuality associated with virginity need not be read as a refusal of any or all sexuality (Rich 103; Nestor 46). In any case, at this point in the narrative of Jane's constitution as subject, Moor House represents an alternative to the sexual exploitation represented by Rochester's request that Jane become his mistress since he can't have her for his wife.

But within the developing scene of the female domestic, St. John Rivers appears as the figure of enforced heterosexuality, as the language through which he tries to persuade Jane to marry suggests. Rivers disapproves of Jane's plans to remain at Moor House with Mary and Diana and to teach at Morton school after she receives her inheritance, telling her that Marsh End is "not the scene of fruition," that she should "look beyond Moor House and Morton, and sisterly society and the selfish calm and sensual comfort of civilized affluence" (33.416-417), and that if she refuses to marry him she will "limit [herself] forever to a track of selfish ease and barren obscurity" (33.434).<sup>19</sup> Rivers's will to domination is, as Rochester's is earlier, represented through the discourse of

colonialism.<sup>20</sup> Rivers takes Jane away from her study of German, the language that Diana and Mary read, and makes her learn Hindustani, the language of the colonizer, so that she can accompany him to India as a missionary's wife. Jane describes herself as being fettered and in his servitude.

If, as Spivak shows, the novel will redeem St. John's colonialism in its complicity with "the unquestioned idiom of imperialist presuppositions" that underlies Jane's emergence as a heterosexual (and therefore legitimate) subject following her marriage (Spivak 249), in the Moor House chapters the ideologies of colonialism and heterosexuality restrict rather than enable Jane's subject-constitution. Critics have minimized the significance of the Moor House episode as a site of resistance to enforced heterosexuality because it does, after all, end with presumably happy marriages for all three women. Wyatt argues that although the episode does present an "alternative lifestyle" for Jane, one based on sisterly affection, the episode serves a more important function for the heterosexual plot; it alleviates anxieties about the incestuous nature of Jane's in-house relationship with the older Rochester by providing Jane with a family unit which she can then leave to marry "an exogamous lover--Rochester after all" (31). For Wyatt, "the sequence is the message": "To introduce the possibility of a community of women based

on shared intellectual pleasures and mutual affection, only to reject it without question for a man, does not so much suggest an alternative as affirm the cultural myth that without a man a woman's life is incomplete" (37).

I would argue, however, that whether Jane gives up the possibility of a community of women without question is debatable. Even in arguing that Moor House is another example of how female identification is a form of stasis for Jane, Nestor draws attention to the strong language of attachment in Jane's description of her desire to keep house with her cousins:

Jane's cousin Diana exhorts her to 'be obedient' (349), and at Moor-House Jane is once more overwhelmed by an attractive and intelligent female figure who offers her nurture and ministration. Accordingly, she finds that she takes 'pleasure in yielding to an authority' (348) like Diana's, and a certain stasis overtakes her again . . . . In her clinging 'tenaciously to the ties of flesh' (395) Jane forswears any determination to 'go forth': 'I will live at Moor-House . . . I will attach myself for life to Diana and Mary' (391). Thus, ironically, the contentment she could not muster to earn Mrs Reed's approval at the beginning of the novel, she determinedly embraces at Moor-House: '"St. John," I said, "I think you are almost wicked to talk so. I am disposed to be as content as a queen, and you try to stir me up to restlessness!"' (395).

Although Jane's ties here, even those "of the flesh," seem not so much erotic as familial, it seems that what Jane refuses without question is the prospect of becoming St. John's wife rather than the prospect of living "content as a queen" with her "sisters." Further, although the



narrative of heterosexuality will interrupt Jane's relationship with Mary and Diana as it did earlier with Miss Temple and Helen, Jane's bond with her cousins is perhaps the only instance of identification in the novel that is unmarked by structures of opposition. Jane defines herself not against but in sympathy with these women whom she resembles, and in whom she takes "the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principle" (30.76).

Certainly, Jane's "sympathy" or identification with her cousins is based on the conservative impulse toward class solidarity; Mary and Diana prove satisfying as companions where Mrs. Fairfax and Bessie, and even Helen and Miss Temple as women working under male authority, did not. But unlike Nestor, I would argue that Jane's expression of her affinity to Mary and Diana is not characterized by the feelings of restlessness and "self-submersion" that define Jane's friendships with other women. This suggests that the Moor House episode does not function to propel Jane toward heterosexuality in the same way that her earlier dis/identifications with women do; unmarked by structures of difference and erotic tension, the Moor House scenes do not threaten the consolidation of Jane's identity as white, middle-class, and heterosexual. So while it does not foreclose or oppose the novel's conclusion in heterosexual romance with Rochester, it does

stand as a viable alternative to the compulsory heterosexuality represented by St. John.

### **Mirroring and Fragmentation in *Wide Sargasso Sea***

My reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is partial in that it treats the novel primarily as it links *Jane Eyre* with *Abeng*. In the context of my argument about how these three narratives of female development both carry and resist patriarchal and colonial ideologies, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is most useful for the way it shows in a relatively schematic form what I discuss more fully in the other two novels--how the desire for/failure of female bonding, articulated in terms of racial ambiguity, relates to menstruation and schooling as structural narrative elements that signify lesbian eroticism as a site of resistance.

The opening lines of *Wide Sargasso Sea* foreground the legacy of Jamaica's colonial history by establishing the ambiguous race and class status of white Creoles following Emancipation: "They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks" (17). Rochester will later reiterate the distinction that the new colonialists, who are fresh from England, maintain between themselves and the former slave holders when he says of his West Indian bride that she is "of English descent but not English, or European either." The white Creole marks both the distinction and the collapse of distinction between black and white, because as we saw in

Chapter 1 with Edward Long's and Richard Madden's travel narratives, she embodies the white colonist's anxieties about how racial purity is threatened by contact with the black slave population. The Creole's liminal status is marked within Rhys's novel by the way she is defined as white Creole, or at least passing for white, rather than black Creole or mulatto, but she is also described in terms of darkness and blackness, especially regarding her hair and eyes. This duality allows for a shifting pattern of racial identification and the insertion of racial difference into the mother/child dyad.

Like *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea* begins with the failure of the mother-daughter relationship, which is articulated in terms of racial difference. For Antoinette Cosway, Rhys's reconstitution of Brontë's Bertha Mason, the shifting patterns of colonial relations among the English, white Creoles and former slaves destabilize the structures of identification that defined her mother's race and class affiliations. While mother and daughter share the same racial heritage, the difference in their alliances proves problematic; Annette Cosway rejects her daughter's too-close association with black slaves because it reminds her of their ambiguous identity as white Creoles. The novel makes the link between Annette's struggle with her tenuous social position and her rejection of her daughter clear in the scene where Antoinette appears before nouveau riche

white neighbors in her black playmate Tia's dirty dress; Antoinette shames her mother by making visible the family's status as "white niggers" just as Annette is being courted by a newly arrived Englishman who offers her the possibility of reassimilating into the new colonial society. At this moment, mother and daughter represent figuratively different racial and class identities, and Annette refuses the daughter's embodiment as "white nigger." Following this scene, Annette continually pushes her daughter away from her, preferring the company of her crippled son, clinging to the mute Pierre as a symbol of the patriarchally-structured (if now debilitated) plantation society in which her subject-position was well-defined, and turning away from Antoinette, who so painfully mirrors her own fragmentation.

But whereas in *Jane Eyre* maternal rejection is the catalyst for Jane's solidification of her own identity in opposition to a series of other women, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is the structural origin of Antoinette's failure to consolidate an identity that will always be marked by conflict: she will alternately long to be black, fear blackness and assume white privilege, and ultimately, like her mother, she will be sacrificed to the renegotiation of colonial power between men.<sup>21</sup> So while the narrative of female development in *Jane Eyre* must resist its own impulses toward female identification in order to allow

heterosexual romance to prevail, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, in which the heterosexual romance between Antoinette and Rochester is predetermined to fail by the narrative of *Jane Eyre*, focuses on the desire for identification.

Rhys's novel makes explicit how colonialism and patriarchy disrupt that desire for female identification in the well-known scene where Antoinette is faced with the irreconcilable differences between herself and her childhood playmate, Tia. Having been rejected by her mother, Antoinette is forced to depend on the people her family had formerly enslaved for care and companionship. She turns to Christophine, Annette's housekeeper who remains with the family after Emancipation, for the nurturing her mother refuses her, and Christophine in turn procures Tia as a "friend" for Antoinette. The two girls spend their days at the bathing pool until Annette remarries and she and her husband try to restore Coulibri, the family estate, to its former prosperity. When the African-Caribbean community expresses its resentment of refurbished colonialism by burning Coulibri to the ground, Antoinette turns to Tia in a moment of intense identification that is tied in with her need for her mother:

I saw Tia and her mother and I ran to her, for she was all that was left of my life as it had been. We had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As I ran, I thought, I will live with Tia and I will be like her. Not to leave Coulibri. Not to go. (45)

Tia and her mother stand for the unified mother-daughter dyad; in running towards "her" (the unclear pronoun referent merges Tia and her mother), Antoinette hopes to remain at the home which she associates with her mother's presence. Antoinette's fantasy of pleasurable identification is shattered when Tia throws a stone, hitting Antoinette's head.

The scene recalls the book-throwing incident that structurally marks the figurative onset of menses and Jane's subjection to patriarchy in the opening chapters of *Jane Eyre*. Paralleling Brontë's novel, where Jane recognizes in the red-room mirror the image of herself as other, Antoinette sees herself as other mirrored in Tia's face: "We stared at each other, blood on my face, tears on hers. It was as if I saw myself. Like in a looking-glass" (45). But where *Jane Eyre* uses racial difference metaphorically to define the Reeds as the oppressors and Jane as the oppressed in a way that doesn't compromise but consolidates Jane's assumption of a unified identity, *Wide Sargasso Sea* replays the mirror-stage to emphasize the disruption of unified identity for both the black and the white child. Antoinette attempts to stabilize her own identity by fixing Tia within the imaginary wholeness of the mother-child dyad, but Tia can only mirror Antoinette's painful sense of difference because she is herself marked as other.

The connection between the maternal and the menstrual as structural narrative elements that signal the unhappy transition from the fantasy of female identification to enforced heterosexuality and colonialism is apparent in that the incident not only signals the end of Antoinette's friendship with Tia, but it also portends her fatal marriage to Rochester. When Antoinette asks if the wound left by the stone will leave a mark on her forehead, Aunt Cora responds "It won't spoil your wedding day" (49), alluding to virginity as a form of unmarkedness-- Antoinette's physical purity is intact. But the signifiers of racial difference and sexual status collapse here. As the figurative mark of how Antoinette's relationships with blacks separate her from the English Rochester, the wound stands for her impurity; even though it will appear to heal, making that impurity invisible, it will spoil her wedding day and destroy her identity within that marriage.

*Wide Sargasso Sea* develops *Jane Eyre's* nascent connection between the maternal, the menstrual, and the emergence of lesbian eroticism as a site of resistance to the destructive regulations of enforced heterosexuality and colonialism. Between the scene of figurative menstruation involving Tia and Antoinette's wedding day, *Wide Sargasso Sea* describes Antoinette's adolescent years at convent school. In this all-female environment that discourages vanity and espouses chastity, the girls admire and model

themselves after each other and eroticize each other. Antoinette's description of her schoolmate Louise de Plana, a Creole girl who reminds her of her mother, is particularly sensuous. Although, as in *Jane Eyre*, the explicitly racialized figure drops out of the narrative as it becomes more sexualized, leaving Tia behind, it is Louise's darkness and West Indianness that are eroticized: "Ah but Louise! Her small waist, her thin brown hands, her black curls which smelled of vetiver, her high sweet voice, singing so carelessly in Chapel about death. Like a bird would sing" (55). Here Louise's brown skin and black hair are emphasized, and the smell of vetiver will become the signifier of the Creole woman's unrestrained sensuality by the end of the novel when Antoinette, locked in the attic at Thornfield, will find one of her favorite red dresses in a closet, faintly redolent of "vetivert [sic] and frangipanni, of cinnamon and dust and lime trees when they are flowering" (185).

The double valence of school as the site of both the erotic/maternal and of training for heterosexuality is expressed in the way that Antoinette appropriates narratives of heterosexual romance from the lives of the saints, who are all "loved by rich and handsome young men" (53), to recall her mother in the shape of Louise to the place of refuge that she has discovered in the convent; Antoinette personifies the countries that the saints are



from, and "France is a lady with black hair wearing a white dress because Louise was born in France fifteen years ago, and my mother, whom I must forget and pray for as though she were dead, though she is still living, liked to dress in white" (55).

While narratives of heterosexuality are recited at the convent, Antoinette regards the presage of marriage in her own life as an intrusion on this sheltered female space. After a visit from Antoinette's stepfather in which she is given to understand that she will make her debut, Antoinette has a dream that foreshadows how Rochester will betray her, and that recalls the imagery of nighttime, overgrown gardens, and impeded travel that haunt Jane's dreams before her near marriage to Rochester. On the verge of entering into the heterosexual economy, Antoinette fantasizes a return to the maternal/erotic. When she wakes from her nightmare, Sister Marie Augustine is standing by her bed and leads her from the dormitory so she will not disturb the other girls. Erotic overtones characterize Antoinette's articulation of her desire for the intimacy of the mother's comforting bedside attentions at this point; she wonders to herself if the Sister "will take [her] behind the mysterious curtains to the place where she sleeps" (60). The scene recalls an earlier one in the novel where Antoinette wakes from a nightmare to find her mother beside her bed. Her mother covers her but then leaves her

to go to her brother. Alone, Antoinette sees that "the light of the candle in Pierre's room [is] still there," signifying her exclusion from her mother's warmer relationship with her brother (27). As in *Jane Eyre*, then, where Jane spends the night before her wedding with Adèle, recalling her night with Helen in Miss Temple's bed, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the mother's bed as a place of comfort and enclosure is structurally positioned as the last refuge before impending heterosexuality.

**Savage Genealogy: Abeng's White Fathers and Mythic Mothers**

*Abeng* crystallizes the moments of incipient lesbian sexuality in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* by rendering the maternal and the menstrual as structural elements of an explicitly lesbian narrative of female development, and most clearly articulates a critique of colonialism by figuring lesbian sexuality as response to the disruption of maternal identification by racial difference. Not only is the visibility of racial difference literally, rather than figuratively, what comes between mother and daughter in *Abeng*, but the desire for the mother in the figure of the explicitly racialized other does not drop out of the novel as the narrative of female development becomes sexualized; here, the childhood relationship between the light-skinned girl and the black girl that disappears in *Wide Sargasso Sea* when Antoinette goes to school carries over into the heroine's confrontation with issues of sexual identity.

*Abeng* also extends the critique of the fantasy of pure identification that is implicit in the earlier novels by setting the narrative of female identification against not just the intrusion of compulsory heterosexuality, but also against the patriarchal lineage that also shapes the heroine's identity and demands that she uphold the boundaries of racial difference. Whereas in *Jane Eyre* we have a heroine with no parents, and in *Wide Sargasso Sea* we have a heroine with a mother but no father, in *Abeng*, the introduction of the father delineates the connection between compulsory heterosexuality and discourses of racial purity; *Abeng* suggests that cross-racial, erotic identification between women is threatening to both race and gender privilege in that it refuses to value and reproduce the resemblances that ensure white superiority.

The issues of heredity, identity, and desire taken up in *Abeng* recall Michel Foucault's formulation of genealogy as a method of analysis that critiques the search for pure origins. Foucault's concept of genealogy lends itself to a reading of *Cliff* because it is firmly located in the scopic, the same realm that Clare, the novel's protagonist, struggles to decipher. In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Foucault explains how genealogy turns around the act of looking: "[genealogy] corresponds to the acuity of glance that distinguishes, separates, and disperses" (87). Genealogy's task is to read the marks of difference on the

text of the body that presents the illusion of unitary identity:

The body manifests the stigmata of past experience and also gives rise to desires, failings, and errors. These elements may join in a body where they achieve a sudden expression, but as often, their encounter is an engagement in which they efface each other, where the body becomes the pretext of their insurmountable conflict.

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body.  
(83)

In *Abeng*, it is the "desires, failings, and errors" of colonial history that imprint Clare's body, which is the site (sight) of contradiction about her identity as a light-skinned but not white Jamaican girl. Her family history is the history of colonized Jamaica, and Clare's struggle to make sense of the disparate lineages represented by her father and mother is also her struggle to locate herself amidst competing discourses about color, class, gender, and sexuality. Although Clare is descended from African slaves and European plantation owners on both sides of her family, her family splits racial identity down maternal and paternal bloodlines. Her father's family, the Savages, self-identify as white, while her mother's family, the Freeman's, self-identify as black. Here, the family names revise the colonialist association of savagery with

blackness and freedom with whiteness, suggesting that signifiers of racial difference are arbitrary and shifting. Each parent participates in withholding from Clare the possibility of multicultural identity. Clare, then, must take up the task of the genealogist, who "sets out to study the beginning--numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by a historical eye" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 81). Clare struggles to discover her African heritage in order to forge an identification with blackness that is precluded by her light skin and hair.

In this task, Clare is thwarted by her father, Boy Savage, who stands for the pursuit of pure (white) origins, and constructs Clare's lightness as the phenotype of assimilation. As Boy's first name suggests, he has submitted to the values and hierarchies of colonialism. He denies his Black heritage, insisting on his family's uninterruptedly white descent from a wealthy English colonist in spite of the fact that "the Savages were hard put to explain the changes in their complexions, eyes, and hair, and why so many of them had freckles" (29). His concept of history is also characterized by colonialist fictions of origin; he gives Jamaica a classical Western lineage, explaining to Clare that the West Indies were the remains of Atlantis or Crete (Cliff 9), and he is like the philosopher described by Foucault who imagines the origin of things to be "the moment of their greatest perfection,

when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator"

(79):

Mr. Savage was fascinated by myth and natural disaster. He collected books on Stonehenge, the Pyramids, the Great Wall of China--he knew the details of each ancient structure and was convinced that all were connected to some "divine plan," he said. Nothing was an achievement of human labor. Devising arch and circle; creating brick from straw and mud and hauling stones to the site of construction. Mr. Savage was a believer in extraterrestrial life--in a mythic piece of machinery found in a bed of coal; part of a spaceship, he concluded; proof that we had been visited by beings from another planet . . .  
(9)

Boy's attempt to "capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities" (Foucault, "Nietzsche" 78), is ahistorical in the extreme. Boy's mystical view of human origins as celestial elides histories of slavery and colonialism that Cliff foregrounds elsewhere in the novel:

Slavery was not an aberration--it was an extreme. Consider the tea plantations of Ceylon and China. The coffee plantations of Sumatra and Colombia. The tobacco plantations of Pakistan and the Philippines. The mills of Lowell. Manchester. Leeds. Marseilles. The mines of Wales. Alsace-Lorraine. The railroads of the Union-Pacific. Cape-to-Cairo. All worked by captive labor . . . The enslavement of Black people--African peoples--with its processions of naked and chained human beings, whipping of human beings, rape of human beings, lynching of human beings, buying and selling of human beings--made other forms of employment in the upkeep of western civilization seem pale. (28)

Boy similarly elides the history of slavery that produces his own family as "white"; the Savages are "emphatic in their statement that James Edward Constable Savage, the

puisne justice and advisor to the Crown, who had studied law at the Inns of Court, had been one of the only Jamaican landowners never to impregnate a female slave or servant" (29). The colonialist defense mechanism through which Clare's father, in order to preserve the boundaries between the dominant and the oppressed, overvalues marks of whiteness and refuses marks of miscegenation, makes it nearly impossible for Clare to define herself in relation to her heritage.

The novel makes the difficulty of Clare's attempt at self-definition most explicit when Clare tries to interpret her own racial identity by asking her father to explain the Holocaust, which she has learned about from reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Struggling against the sanitized colonial version of Jamaican history taught in school, Clare's identification with Anne Frank is her effort to think through a history of racial oppression in relation to a figure that is, like herself, both marked and unmarked. According to her teachers, Jews may be light but are not white, and are aligned with other people of color in their "devotion to their own difference" (70). As Clare's teacher explains in a comparison that displaces racial oppression with religious oppression, and so calls attention to their intersection, "the suffering of the Jews was similar . . . to the primitive religiosity of Africans, which had brought

Black people into slavery . . . both types of people were flawed in irreversible ways" (71).

Confused by her teacher, Clare turns to her father, but Boy Savage reinforces the teacher's racist history, while refusing Clare's identification with the Jews as both white and not white. Boy adheres to the "one-drop rule"<sup>22</sup> in answering Clare's questions about Jewish identity, explaining that being half-Jewish makes one a Jew. But he creates his daughter in his own self-image, telling her that she is white because, in spite of the fact that her mother is colored, as his daughter she is a Savage. The history of miscegenation that produces Clare's lightness is the very history that her father's perception of her body as white conceals. Boy's attempts to construct a unitary (white) identity that excludes the multi-racial heritage represented by Clare's mother do not make sense to Clare as she looks down at her legs, awaiting her father's explanation of the Holocaust: "she was considering how she could be white with a colored mother, brown legs, and ashy knees" (73).

Clare's mother, Kitty, although light-skinned herself ("like the inside of a Bombay mango when the outside covering is cut away" 127), maintains a vexed and intensely private identification with "darkness" that she doesn't share with her lighter-skinned daughter. In guarding from Clare this alliance with darkness and in letting Clare's



father, Boy, raise her daughter, Kitty follows the unspoken rule "that a light-skinned child was by common law, or traditional practice, the child of the whitest parent"--believing perhaps that in doing so she offers Clare the opportunity to assume the privileges of whiteness (129). The patterns of maternal withholding and betrayal in Clare's biological genealogy are established with Judith, Clare's great-great grandmother, a white woman who "left her family to run off with one of their servants. This woman, Judith, never saw the family of her mother and father again, but she made her own. She raised five children in a two-room house in the country, with her husband, Mas Samuel" (13).

While Judith's ostracism by her white family illustrates the system of matrilineal filiation under slavery, the novel makes it clear that filiation doesn't necessarily produce affiliation when it reveals that Judith sent Clare's grandmother into the fields to cut cane, sacrificing her daughter to the structures of difference and oppression that her own marriage transgressed. Miss Mattie, Clare's grandmother, is distanced from her white mother, and eventually draws closer to her father, who provides for the daughter's identification with blackness in this generation. Miss Mattie repeats the pattern of distancing with her own daughter, a pattern which is figured in a traumatic episode from Kitty's childhood in

which Miss Mattie sends her sick child with Clary, a friend of the family to the charity hospital for surgery, but doesn't herself accompany or visit her daughter. While the grown-up Kitty "still wondered about the absence of Miss Mattie and the presence of Clary during those days . . . neither one, mother or daughter, ever talked about the hospital, not when Kitty was seven, not when she was thirty-five" (141). Ironically, Kitty later names Clare for Clary, the figure for the support that her mother was unable to provide for her and that she, in turn, is unable to provide for her daughter. But the novel suggests that in withholding intimacy from Clare, Kitty also withholds information that Clare needs to survive in a world structured by racism and sexism. For although, as Françoise Lionnet puts it, "Clare Savage embodies the physical ideal of the assimilated" (326), in her need for her mother she remains tied to the fragmented racial and cultural identities produced by colonialism.

*Abeng* represents Clare's attempts to account for her mother's failings and to refigure her as supportive by returning to the connection between the racial oppression of Jews and Black Jamaicans. Through a complex play on naming, the novel connects Kitty Savage to *The Diary of Anne Frank*, in which Anne addresses her diary as "Kitty," and then to Kitty Hart of the Holocaust survival narrative *I Am Alive*. Clare speculates about why Kitty Hart lived

while Anne Frank died, and decides that it has something to do with "the remoteness of Anne's mother," a conclusion which in turn leads her to speculate about the remoteness of her own mother:

Would Anne have lived to see her liberation if her mother had been different? Would Anne's mother have been different if the Holocaust had not happened? Where was the source of her coldness? Where did her remoteness come from? The mother of Kitty Hart, about whom they had not made a movie, stood in contrast to the mother of Anne Frank. She had fought for her daughter's survival. She had stolen food from the dead for her. She had hidden her when she was sick, so her daughter wouldn't be selected for death. Did Kitty survive because her mother had confronted the horror and taught her daughter to live through the days? (80)

Here Kitty Hart's mother stands for the fantasy of the good mother, and the absence of a movie about this mother underscores Abeng's own inability to represent her. But the narrative shifts between representing what the mother doesn't have access to--a knowledge of racial history/lineage that might provide her, and through her, her daughter, with survival skills--and fantasizing an impossible fullness in relationship to the imaginary "good" mother.

In imagining this good mother, Abeng attempts to reconstruct the body of the other--the woman of color--by creating alternative genealogies to the patriarchal, colonialist ones represented by Boy Savage. In the novel, female ancestors who are outspoken in their allegiance to colonized races represent heterogeneous New World

identities. The good mother appears as the mythologized Nanny, the Maroon leader of the Jamaican slave rebellion who wore a necklace of white men's teeth and could "catch a bullet between her buttocks and render the bullet harmless" (14); as Mma Alli, a slave on Clare's grandfather's plantation who was an obeah woman "with a right breast that had never grown" and who "had never lain with a man . . . [because] she loved only women in that way" (34-35); and, more ambivalently, as Inez, her grandfather's concubine, whose multi-cultural, aboriginal heritage links her to the Miskito Indians and the Ashanti (33).

In depicting the relationship among these three mythohistorical mother figures, *Abeng* articulates the complex intersection of lesbianism, menstruation and the maternal. Refusing to bear a child conceived out of repeated rapes by Judge Savage Constable, Inez turns to Mma Alli, who induces an abortion with a combination of herbs that bring on contractions and with love-making that soothes the cramps. In the course of her relationship with Mma Alli, Inez "remembers her mother," escapes the Judge, flees to Nanny, and participates in the Maroon rebellion. Through Inez's abortion, lesbianism and menstrual blood are associated both with maternal nurture and with the refusal of motherhood when motherhood is also figured as the reproduction of racist and sexist colonial systems which oppress women of color by forcing them to bear the children

who will also be enslaved, raped and beaten by white masters.

By coding lesbianism and menstruation as a refusal of enforced heterosexuality, *Abeng* emphasizes how, within the narrative of female development, menstruation marks both adolescence, when romantic friendships among girls are permissible, and adulthood, when girls are eligible for entrance into the heterosexual economy of marriage and childbearing. The novel's representation of Clare's friendship with Zoe, who is a literary reincarnation of *Wide Sargasso Sea's* Tia, locates school at the center of this cusp marked by menstruation. School is at once what allows the girls to be together and what separates them from each other. On the one hand, Clare and Zoe's friendship exists because Clare has summer vacations in the country where her mother grew up and where the girls feel "somewhat free of the rules of [school and town]"; on the other hand, the girls' friendship is limited to those two months of summer and cannot be permanently immune to the world represented by Clare's school in Kingston, where the boundaries of class and color that the girls cross in their friendship are enforced. For Clare, school is defined ambivalently as that which grooms her for (white) womanhood and that which preserves her from it; while she is in school, she does not have to be married, but she is taught by her teachers' example what it is to be a lady--that

ladies are white, married, proper, and "[do] not speak in a familiar manner to those beneath their station. Those with the congenital defect of poverty--or color" (98). Zoe, whose mother is a squatter on Miss Mattie's land, is marked by both those "defects" of poverty and color.

But school is not only a place where social structures are ingrained; in *Abeng*, it also represents the possibility of other social structures, specifically ones that resist enforced heterosexuality and colonialism. The novel establishes school as a harbor for alternative ideologies and alternative lifestyles through Mr. Powell, the schoolmaster who teaches in the country where Kitty and Zoe grow up. Mr. Powell, a former member of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, forgoes the British schoolbooks and teaches his students poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. He is coded as gay through his associations with homosexual poet Claude McKay and with Clinton, one of *Abeng's* two gay ("battyman") characters who commit suicide. Mr. Powell's school inspires Kitty's dreams of taking her mother's land and building a school where she will write her own manuals and "teach country children about their own island, while pretending to adhere to the teachings of the crown . . . [and] go beyond Mr. Powell in her lessons" (129). The interruption of Kitty's plans by marriage is played out again in the life of Clare, who like her mother

dreams of setting up a country school where she and Zoe can teach together.

Clare's fantasy of establishing a school with Zoe projects the possibility for intimacy between women beyond the end of their school days, a point that, within the heterosexual narrative of female development, should signal the end of romantic friendships. But it also elides the fact that the two girls are already divided by structures of gender, race, and class differences. Clare's recognition of both the quality of her feelings for Zoe and of the ways in which they will be limited is dramatized in the episode where Zoe has to dissuade Clare from hunting a wild boar that lives in the bush. Zoe tries to explain that killing the boar, construed as an act of white male privilege, would affect her, a dark-skinned, poor country girl, differently than it would Clare, who will return to Kingston at the summer's end. Zoe argues that differences of color and class make Clare's dream of establishing a school with her unrealistic because Zoe will not have the money to go to college and become a teacher, but will become a market woman like her mother. Persuaded, Clare abandons the hunt and the two go swimming. What follows is the dramatization of the differences to which Zoe has drawn Clare's attention.

Clare acknowledges (to herself) her feelings for Zoe as they lie naked together on the rock after swimming.

Clare contemplates female spaces, both the crevices of the rock beaten smooth by washerwomen, and "the ways into their own bodies . . . through which their babies would emerge and into which men would put their thing," but which for the moment "belong to them" (120), and wants "to tell Zoe what she meant to her . . . to lean across Zoe's breasts and kiss her" (124). In remarking later that there is in Clare's romantic feelings for Zoe "something of her need for her mother" (131), Abeng makes explicit the connection between lesbian desire and the daughter's disrupted bond with the mother. Clare's reverie is interrupted by a cane cutter who sees the girls from across the river and hollers "Coo ya! . . . Two gals nekked pon the river-rock" (122). Clare uses her class/race position to defend her turf, slipping from patois into the King's English, invoking her grandmother's status as a property-owner and firing the rifle she had illicitly taken from the house to hunt the boar. The stray bullet kills her grandmother's bull, exposing her transgressions of gender boundaries in planning the hunt. Earlier, the novel defines hunting and killing as a male privilege: during a hog-killing where Clare's half-cousin and playmate, Joshua, excludes her from the male ritual of consuming the animal's penis and testicles. Clare leaves her cousin, and is then faced with returning to the company of her grandmother's guests, women who reflect rigid boundaries of class and color in the way



they are geographically divided into groups--the wealthiest in the parlor, the poorest in the yard. In the hog-killing episode, then, being divested of gender privilege is associated with systems of race and class oppression.

In dramatizing Clare's assumption of race and class privilege and her appropriation of gendered power, the scene where Clare accidentally kills her grandmother's bull brilliantly analyzes how the rigid boundaries of race, class, and gender work to solidify Clare's distance from Zoe. Clare hunts the boar as an act of rebellion against the lesson she learns at the hog-killing, "when she had been told absolutely, by the boys, by the dressed up women, by Miss Mattie . . . just who she was to be in this place . (114). She imagines that by killing the hog, she will be proclaiming her strength in a way that will be a tribute and a claim to the women, including her mother and her lost ancestors, who are oppressed by the categories of difference: "Kitty was in there somewhere--of course--and what Kitty would think about a daughter who could kill--and thus survive--in the wild. Kitty Hart and Anne Frank were there" (115). As she and Zoe climb the hillside to find the boar, Zoe accuses Clare of fantasizing that she is a "Maroon smaddy" or a "Guinea warrior," recalling the figures of Nanny, MMA Ali, and Inez. But at the crucial moment when Clare moves to protect her claim to these women, symbolized by her relationship with Zoe, and ends up

killing the bull, she betrays that maternal genealogy by effectively leaping back to the side of her father, as Clare's grandmother suggests when she characterizes her actions as those of "A girl who seemed to think she was a boy. Or white" (134).

Unlike in *The Well of Loneliness*, where the assumption of masculine privilege consolidates Stephen's sexual identity, in *Abeng*, it disrupts the identity Clare is trying to forge by separating her from Zoe and from her mother, who agrees with Boy to send Clare to live with a friend of the family, Mrs. Phillips, an old white woman who can, in Kitty's words, teach Clare "to be a [white] lady" while she finishes school (150). At the point in the narrative of female development where the girl is expected to prepare herself to enter the heterosexual economy of adulthood and childbearing, the youthful fantasy of school as a site of alternative ideologies and "lifestyles" is placed in tension with a normalizing conception of school as the place where girls are socialized to assume the roles defined for them by ideologies of colonialism and patriarchy.

But the landscape of the shooting episode is recalled at the end of the novel in a dream scene that highlights Clare's isolation at Mrs. Phillips' house, rewriting the outcome of the boar hunt in connection with the onset of

menses. Earlier, the novel explicitly positioned menstruation as a transitional point in Clare's life:

Menstruation appeared to her as the culmination of the process of what was happening within and without her girl's body and she wanted to understand it for what it was--and what it would mean in her life. She had a sense of it as something which would allow no turning back--a "milestone" she called it. But she had a sense of it as a sweetness--a truly private piece of life--like the inscription in Greek on an award she had won at school: "Your possession forever."  
(106)

Here menstruation is a source of pleasure and eroticism; it is associated with the sensuousness of Clare's first masturbatory self-explorations, and with female friendships in that it is something that Clare has discussed with Zoe and something that Kitty refers to in code language as her "friend."

At the end of the novel, Clare interprets her experiences through the lens of this eroticized concept of menstruation. Drawing on imagery from the violent scene in *Wide Sargasso Sea* where Tia throws the rock at Antoinette, Abeng weaves together the thematic threads of lesbianism, menstruation, and racial difference to repair Clare's disrupted identifications with other women of color:

Clare dreamed that she and Zoe were fist-fighting by the river in St. Elizabeth. That she picked up a stone and hit Zoe underneath the eye and a trickle of blood ran down her friend's face and onto the rock where she sat. The blood formed into a pool where the rock folded over on itself. And she went over to Zoe and told her she was sorry--making a compress of moss drenched in water to soothe the cut. Then squeezing an aloe leaf to close the wound. (165)

Although the novel has consistently critiqued the paradigm of pure identification that is unmarked by racial difference, represented most obviously by Boy, it could be argued that at the end of the novel, menstruation becomes a category of resemblance in which a feminized version of that fantasy of identification is played out when bleeding is constructed as the constitutional link between women. The cramps of Clare's first period wake her from the dream, which the book tells us Clare is not ready to understand: "She had no idea that everyone we dream about we are" (166). But it is blood/bleeding, which Clare describes to herself in words that echo her mother's description of menstruation as a "sweet pain," that connects her with a continuum of women--Zoe, Kitty, Inez, Mma Ali, and Nanny--healing the divisions between them.<sup>23</sup> In Clare's dream of bleeding, touching, and healing, menstruation functions as a sort of imaginary resolution to the problem of identification across boundaries of difference by presenting the fantasy of a unifying female experience that symbolically brings Clare closer to her m/others.

I want to make clear that the novels do not represent lesbian eroticism as a form of female identification that successfully replaces or repairs failed maternal and cross-racial identifications. In fact, the novels consistently represent all identifications as failed in the sense that they can never be fully achieved.<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler suggests

that "identifications are never fully and finally made; they are incessantly reconstituted and, as such, are subject to the volatile logic of iterability. They are that which is constantly marshalled, consolidated, retrenched, contested, and, on occasion, compelled to give way" (*Bodies* 105). It is this iterability around the process of identification that I think all three novels represent. They show how problems of identification are *phantasmically*, not actually, resolved through tropes of lesbian sexuality, menstruation, and schooling. In relocating the mirror-stage, the novels juxtapose the fantasy that female identification can protect girls from the difficulties of being socialized as other in a patriarchal, colonial culture, with the actual intrusion of the social into the realm of the maternal/feminine. What we get in these *Bildungsromans*, then, is the fantasy of imaginary wholeness repeatedly undercut, showing how female identification is always social, always interrupted by cultural markers of difference.

As a contemporary writer who draws on post-colonial and lesbian and feminist refusals of unitary identity, Cliff is able to deconstruct fantasies of identification that are based on strategies of visibility more extensively than *Jane Eyre* does, and she is able to bring same-sex desire into the foreground without replicating the phobia of novels such as *Invisible Man* and *Strange Brother*. But as

Abeng develops the narrative of fragmented subjectivity begun in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, lesbianism becomes the site of the fantasy of identification. Thus, the fantasy itself has not been fully deconstructed, even if the origin of the fantasy in resemblances based on racial identity has been critiqued. In the final chapter, I turn to lesbian-feminist criticism that is, like Cliff's work, informed by the notion that fragmented and multiple subjectivities can disrupt normative categories of identity. I draw attention to how contemporary theories of race, gender and sexuality also refigure lesbianism as a site of identification, with the result that strategies of visibility are sometimes deconstructed and sometimes reinscribed to underpin the construction of sexual identity.

#### Notes

1. As Jacqueline Rose explains in her book *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, the Freudian narrative of identity-formation hinges on the child's refusal of visible difference:

Freud often related the question of sexuality to that of visual representation. Describing the child's difficult journey into adult sexual life, he would take as his model little scenarios, or the staging of events, which demonstrated the complexity of an essentially visual space, moments in which perception founders (the boy child refuses to believe in the anatomical difference that he sees). (227)

The girl's identification with the mother, while seeming to be based on their sameness, is also the result of the castration complex that is precipitated by the sight of anatomical difference (Rose, *Feminine Sexuality* 22).

2. In Freudian theory, "primary" identification is pre-oedipal and "secondary" identification post-oedipal (Fuss, "Freud's Fallen Woman" 53).

3. See Spivak, Meyer, the Marxist Feminist Literature Collective's and Mary Poovy's analysis of the novel's rags to riches plot, and Gayatri Spivak's critique of how Jane's progress follows the program of colonialism, which has sparked the current wave of criticism on the novel's colonial discourses.

4. I use the terms lesbian sexuality and lesbian eroticism in my discussion of all three texts, aware of the historical problems that this poses. The term lesbian is anachronistic for a reading of Brontë's novel, given that it was not in usage until the end of the nineteenth century, and Cliff's self-identification as a lesbian, which informs her writing of the precursor texts as a lesbian novel in *Abeng*, is not in evidence for Rhys. But without reading *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Jane Eyre* as lesbian novels per se, I would argue two things: first, that it is the latent eroticism of the mother-daughter relationships represented in these novels that allows Cliff to write lesbian desire into *Abeng*, and second, that this eroticism is more properly called "lesbian" than "homo" erotic, as homoeroticism is most commonly associated with relationships between men.

5. See Diana Fuss's "Freud's Fallen Women" for a summary of how various psychoanalytic theories of development locate female identification as precultural.

6. Lilian Faderman offers historical evidence for school as the site of homoerotic attachments when she suggests that "more than any other phenomenon, education may be said to have been responsible for the spread among middle-class women of what eventually came to be called lesbianism" because school brought women together and provided them with careers as teachers (*Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* 13).

7. Because *Jane Eyre* resists structures of female identification, Jane's own figurative racial status shifts in relation to which set of characters she is defined against (see, for example, Elsie B. Michie's reading of the opening passage of the novel in *Outside the Pale: Cultural Exclusion, Gender Difference and the Victorian Woman Writer* 65-66). Throughout these opening passages Jane's status as an outsider is rendered in terms of racial difference that serve both to mark her subjection and the Reeds' oppressiveness. For example, in the opening scenes, Jane is described as sitting "cross-legged, like a Turk" in the

breakfast-room, having been excluded from the family circle by Aunt Reed, and as a "rebel slave" (2.44). But the Reed's tyranny over Jane is also rendered in metaphors and descriptions that cast them as the racial others, as when John Reed "sometimes reviled [his mother] for her dark skin, similar to his own" (2.47).] In a later passage, though, Georgiana Reeds' whiteness, her "pink cheeks, and golden curls" which "seem to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault" (2.47-48) imply by contrast Jane's darkness as a child whom Mrs. Reed would have be "lighter, franker, more natural" (1.39). This shifting descriptive strategy is possible because, as Meyer argues, Brontë uses racial difference to signify both the oppressed and the oppressor (261).

8. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe that this type of opposition is really a form of negative identification in which Bertha is figured as "Jane's truest and darkest double" ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress," 360). As Gayatri Spivak has argued, this negative identification is conservative in that it uses racial difference to consolidate Jane's identity by defining her in opposition to her racial others at the expense of their subjectivity ("Three Women's Texts").

9. For an in-depth reading of how the novel uses discourses of racial difference to develop a feminist rhetoric, see Joyce Zonana's excellent article, "The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*," 592-617.

10. Typically, readings of the Lowood scenes emphasize the contrast between Jane and Helen, noting Jane's inability to conform to Christian ideals of self-denial. Certainly the passages where Jane resists Mr. Brocklehurst's accusations that she is ungrateful and a liar--"worse than many a little heathen who says its prayers to Brahma and kneels before a Juggernaut" (7.98)--by imagining herself, not in the spirit of Christian acceptance but in the spirit of anger and rebelliousness, as "a victim and a slave" define her in opposition to the two women. Helen chastises Jane for her rebelliousness by telling her that only "Heathens and savage tribes" nurse their anger and that "Christians and civilized nations disown it" (6.90). The novel (and feminist readers of the novel especially) thus represent Helen as being in many ways unsatisfying as a role model for Jane.

11. For a history of the criticism on *Rasselas*, see Edward Tomarken's "A History of *Rasselas* Criticism, 1759-1986" in his *Johnson, Rasselas, and the Choice of*



*Criticism*, 5-37. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that in Helen's study of *Rasselas*, she is "perhaps comparing Dr. Johnson's Happy Valley to the unhappy one in which she herself is immured" and dreaming of freedom in eternity (346). I would suggest that she may also be contemplating the inadequacies of Lowood as a female community because of the ignorance of its leadership, as well as the comfort of the earthly companionship of intellectual women like Ms. Temple.

12. See Zonana's "The Sultan and the Slave" for a more detailed reading of how the harem functions in feminism's orientalist discourses.

13. Pekuah's characterization of harem women is in keeping with discourses of Orientalism that represented them as uneducated, jealous, and petty. On stereotypes of harem women see Ali Behdad, "The Eroticized Orient: Images of the Harem in Montesquieu and His Precursors."

14. Brontë could also be drawing on more "feminist" images of the harem. Behdad says that "female Orientalists who depicted scenes of the harem represent it differently than male Orientals. At least in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters from Turkey . . . she even claims that oriental women are in fact freer than their counterparts in Europe, for, thanks to their veils which serve them as perpetual masks, they can go anywhere and do anything they wish" (116). Homoeroticism and images of the orient may also inform Brontë's work in coded/unconscious ways. Behdad suggests that the fantasy/threat of women sexually pleasing themselves is part of the Orientalist discourses on harems. He points out that narratives about harems include details about "the popularity of cucumbers among members of the harem and how women are only served chopped cucumbers" (112), and quotes from Chardin's *Voyage en Perse* (1689): "Les Femmes orientales ont toujours passé pour Tribades. J'ai oui assurer si souvent, & à tant de gens, qu'elles le sont, & qu'elles ont des voyes de contenter mutuellement leurs passions, que je le tiens pour fort certain" (Oriental women have always passed for lesbians. I have heard it often, and from enough people, that they are, and that they have ways of mutually satisfying their passions, that I take it to be almost certain) (qtd. in Behdad n24 p 122, my translation).

15. On the subject of this opposition, Meyer, among others, has written on "the topoi of racial 'otherness'" used to describe Bertha in this scene (253).

16. See Gilbert and Gubar for a discussion of how Bertha embodies or mirrors Jane's projected anxieties about marriage (360).

17. In her reading of *Jane Eyre* in "Caliban's Daughter," Cliff sees in Bertha the figure of the lesbian. She notes that there are masculine as well as feminine/maternal elements in the representation of her racial/sexual monstrosity. While she suggests that "Bertha's savagery originates in the forest, on the island, transfused through the bloodlines of her savage mother" (41) she also focuses on Bertha's virility:

In the descriptions of Bertha Rochester, Charlotte Brontë stresses Bertha's virility, her maleness, which are part of Bertha's monstrosity. In those passages, and in the mental images of Bertha and Grace Poole, her keeper, secreted behind a secret door, I find myself thinking of the notion of the lesbian as monster, marauder; the man/woman in the closet.

When Jane calls Bertha "the clothed hyena," I think of the common belief that the hyena is a hermaphroditic creature, capable of switching his/her dominant sexuality. In short, a sexual monstrosity. (48)

In a longer analysis of *Abeng* and *Jane Eyre*, I would more fully explore the connections between gender, sexuality and race in relation to masculinity/the paternal as well as femininity/the maternal.

18. While I read forward in the narrative from Bertha's visit to the mother/child imagery in Jane's stay with Adèle, Pauline Nestor reads backward for the same imagery in Jane's dreams of carrying the infant who clings to her neck, an infant that she drops. In interpreting the dream sequences, Nestor notes the parallel between Jane's decision to marry and Miss Temple's earlier "choice" to marry. She sees in this connection "a refusal to give priority to the claims of dependence associated with maternal protectiveness" and suggests that "the choice Jane makes for her lover" is thus radical. While I agree that Jane's dreams signify, among other things, a refusal of the maternal, Nestor's analysis privileges heterosexuality. What is missing from the analysis is how agonized the "choice" of marriage is for Jane, and that her tearful perception of Adèle as an emblem of her past life can be read as grief over how marriage marks the end of female communities for Jane.

19. This passage connects interestingly with what Elaine Miller says about Brontë's desire to set up house with Ellen Nussey. She quotes a letter from Brontë to Nussey as saying, "If we had but a cottage and a competency of our own, I do think we might live and love on till Death

without being Dependent on any third person for happiness." Miller also suggests that Brontë considered marrying Ellen's brother so that she could live with Ellen (36-37).

20. See Elsie Michie's chapter "The Simianization of the Irish" for a useful analysis of how discourses of orientalism change the representation of colonialism: "the desire to dominate, which appeals when it is projected onto an orientalized figure like Rochester, repels when it takes an explicitly English form like Rivers's" (73).

21. See Moira Ferguson for an analysis of how Antoinette becomes the site of power negotiations between her brother, Rochester, and Daniel Cosway, the son of a slave woman who claims that he and Antoinette share the same father.

22. John G. Mencke explains the logic of the one-drop rule as follows: "By classifying as black all who had any degree of black blood--by insisting that "one drop" of black blood was enough to make any individual a Negro--whites conveniently did away with the mulatto as an anomaly in their racial schema. If whiteness meant pure white, then those of mixed blood were, by definition, not white" (20).

23. For a different interpretation of the ending, see Simon Gikandi's "Narration and the Postcolonial Moment: History and Representation in *Abeng*." Gikandi reads the last line of the novel as "a moment of closure marked by silence and emptiness" (251).

24. There are critics who disagree. Nancy Harrison, for example, reads the ending of *Wide Sargasso Sea* as a recuperation of maternal and cross-racial identification. She points out that her "interpretation differs from readings of *Wide Sargasso Sea* that analyze the relationship between Antoinette and her mother as a failure of bonding that cannot be redeemed," (60), and suggests a reading of Antoinette's suicide as a moment of merging with Others through the decision to affirm the survival of all oppressed women (58). I would argue that the ending of Rhys's novel, which describes Antoinette in language that recalls the description of her mother's parrot falling burning from the glaciis at Coulibri in an episode that dramatizes racial division, is another instance of the failure of identification.

## Chapter 5

### How To Recognize a Lesbian: The Cultural Politics of Looking Like What You Are\*

This chapter looks at how three white feminists, Donna Haraway, Sue-Ellen Case, and Judith Butler theorize radical subjectivities that disrupt race, gender, and sexuality as stable categories which support the definition of the Western unitary subject (read white male heterosexual). Their efforts to denaturalize the categories that regulate identity are constrained at certain moments by the impulse to represent disruptive subjectivities in terms of the visible. The readings of feminist theories that follow shift between analyses of how "woman of color" and "butch" become essentialized as authentic subaltern identities signified by their visibility as "other,"<sup>1</sup> theoretical moves that lead to the displacement from the field of radical subjectivity of those who do not "look like what they are"--women of color who can "pass" for white and femme lesbians who can pass for straight. These shifts between the figures of the woman of color and the butch, which produce breaks in my argument, signal the danger for white critics of enacting race privilege when we try to negotiate a discursive multiplicity that includes race.

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My readings of these writers' works are intended to question and expand rather than diminish their ideas. Feminist theorist Teresa De Lauretis suggests that "feminist critical theory as such begins when the feminist critique of sociocultural formations . . . becomes conscious of itself and turns inward . . . to question its own relation to or possible complicity with those ideologies, its own heterogeneous body of writing and interpretations, their basic assumptions and terms, and the practices which they enable and from which they emerge" (138). It is in this spirit that I proceed to examine the work of feminist writers whose risks have made my own work possible.

Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" has become a cult text since its publication in 1985. The piece is radical in its adaptation of what Haraway calls "technoscience discourses" to articulate a socialist-feminist politics of identity, or perhaps more accurately a politics of identity as nonidentity. Haraway develops a political myth around the image of the cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (174). She suggests that as a hybrid, the cyborg subverts myths of origin and unity that structure Western culture, and proposes that the construction "woman of color" might give some insight into the cyborg myth. What interests her about cyborgian

hybridity is the notion of a "bastard race" as a metaphor for the transgression of boundaries that delineate race, gender, sexuality, the human body--in short, individual and social identity. Examining the writings of women of color, Haraway focuses on the Mexican history/mythology of Malinche, "mother of the mestizo 'bastard' race of the new world, master of languages, and mistress of Cortes," (199). Haraway says "the bastard race teaches us about the power of the margins" (200). Haraway's essay takes part in a politics of heterogeneity that has emerged in postcolonial criticism, a politics that develops a theory of what might be termed the "liminal subject," marked by a resistance to self-identity. An example of such a subject is Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua's "new mestiza," who exists between cultures, languages, races, and genders. Anzaldua's book *Borderlands* (1987) describes a fragmented and multiple subject that strategically deploys the relationships and even the contradictions among its various parts to deconstruct Western narratives of identity based on opposition and hierarchy.

Haraway borrows cultural theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha's phrase "inappropriate/d others" to further describe her boundary creatures:

The term refers to the historical positioning of those who cannot adopt the mask of either 'self' or 'other' offered by previously dominant Western narratives of identity and politics. To be 'inappropriate/d' does not mean 'not to be in relation with'--that is, to be outside

appropriation by being in a special reservation, with the status of the authentic, the untouched, in the allochronic and allotopic condition of innocence. Rather, to be an 'inappropriate/d other' means to be in critical, deconstructive relationality--as the means of making a potent connection that exceeds domination" ("The Actors Are Cyborg, Nature Is Coyote, and the Geography Is Elsewhere: Postscript to 'Cyborgs at Large' 23).

Here it is clear that Haraway is interested in undermining oppositional and hierarchical thinking by positing a subjectivity that is not unitary but multiple and shifting. But the power relations which the fragmented subject is supposed to deconstruct are sometimes replicated within the heterogeneous space of the split subject.<sup>2</sup> Haraway is fully aware of the potential for such replication; in essays and interviews she warns against the dangers of romanticizing and/or appropriating the standpoints of the subjugated, of building new holism out of "summing and subsuming parts" ("Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" 191-92), and of solidifying rather than deconstructing Western privilege in drawing on the standpoints of the subjugated ("The Actors Are Cyborg" 10). Unfortunately, sensitivity to issues of dominance and subordination does not immunize us against playing out old patterns in our work; to take up those issues is to risk revealing where we are still attached to the colonizing modes of thinking which structure our society. The

possibility of breaking out of those modes of thinking lies precisely in the willingness first to take the risk of revealing our links to them and then to unravel the dense configurations of discourses that form those links to begin with.

With this end in mind I want to trace the slippage between deconstructing and replaying old power relationships in "A Manifesto," specifically how that slippage occurs along the axis of visibility. The metaphors of racial difference that Haraway invokes to theorize the cyborg consciously problematize colonialist and racist paradigms of subjectivity. She plays on the use of those metaphors of racial difference in the work of science fiction writer Octavia Butler (*Dawn* 1987)<sup>3</sup>, who considers the potential for both pleasure and danger in the transgression of boundaries which define selfhood, and who is keenly aware of the imperialist power relations inherent in those transgressions.<sup>4</sup> However, in playing on those metaphors, cyborgian imagery relies on constructions of identity which classify according to visual differentiation, or what socialist theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe describe as "the argument from appearance," which runs as follows: "everything presenting itself as different can be reduced to identity. This may take two forms: either appearance is a mere artifice of concealment, or it is a necessary form of the manifestation



of an essence" (21)--in other words, appearance either conceals or manifests the "essence" of its subject. In Haraway's work the argument takes the latter form; the "essential difference" must present itself visibly. Although "A Manifesto" revises the history that constructs the "bastard" as a negatively defined difference, it replicates normative constructions of identity by privileging visibility.

Take, for example, Haraway's description of Cherríe Moraga's relationship to writing, in which writing becomes the term that bestows upon Moraga one form of otherness--racial difference--and suppresses another form of otherness--lesbianism: "Writing marks Moraga's body, affirms it as the body of a woman of color, against the possibility of *passing* into the *unmarked* category of the Anglo father" (199, my emphasis). On one level, this comment construes the political marking of the body as affirmative and critiques the notion of the whiteness as unmarked. But in the context of the issues which Moraga raises in *Loving In the War Years*, the analysis takes on a subtly justificatory tone. One of Moraga's anxieties in *Loving* is her sensitivity to the fact that she is "la guera," fair-skinned, not visibly identifiable as a Chicana, and that she is making a "claim to color, at a time when, among white feminist ranks, it is a 'politically correct' . . . assertion to make" (Moraga 58). Her anxiety

can be traced through the shifting "we" in the essay entitled "La Guera." Moraga uses the first person plural to refer variously to the "dyke" who looks "like a white girl" (52) and the Black woman, as well as to women of color, working class women, lesbian writers, feminists, and Chicanas.

By indicating that Moraga's writing marks her (light) body and keeps her from passing into the unmarked category of the Anglo father (Moraga's father was white), Haraway appears to be absolving Moraga from the guilt she harbors for being able to pass, for not really knowing "what it feels like being shitted on for being brown" (Moraga 54). This exculpating gesture draws Haraway into the discourses that establish a hierarchy of oppressions according to paradigms of visibility. The hierarchy is compounded by Haraway's oversight of Moraga's perception that it is her lesbianism that keeps her from "passing" out of her connection with other women of color in spite of her light skin. Moraga describes how lesbianism links her to the experience of racial oppression by making her difference visible on the body:

It wasn't until I acknowledged and confronted my own lesbianism *in the flesh*, that my heartfelt identification with and empathy for my mother's oppression--due to being poor, uneducated, and Chicana--was realized. My lesbianism is the avenue through which I have learned the most about silence and oppression. . . . What I'm saying is that the joys of looking like a white girl ain't so great since I realized I could be beaten on the street for being a dyke. *If my*

*sister's being beaten because she's Black, it's pretty much the same principle. (my emphasis, 52)*

Here, Moraga establishes skin color as the signifier of racial difference and oppression, and then constructs lesbianism as an analogous signifier. Arguably, both Haraway and Moraga need to perceive Moraga's body as being marked because they privilege skin color as the definitive signifier of difference. In the taxonomies of difference that they inherit through the dominant discourses on race, skin color is the most visible feature of otherness. Thus, in Moraga's work, racial difference takes priority in shaping sexual difference; lesbianism is endowed with the status of the originally and authentically oppressed by association with racial difference, which is already biologized through the visible and so constructed as a natural social category.

Haraway suppresses lesbianism and privileges racial difference even though Moraga already privileges racial difference via lesbianism. This may be because Moraga discusses lesbianism in terms of wholeness and origins, fantasizing it as a metaphoric reunion with the maternal; for Moraga, lesbianism is a linking identity that returns her to the original site of oppression, the Chicana mother. This contradicts the project of Haraway's "A Manifesto," which wants to construct both the lesbian and the woman of color as fragmented identities:

*Loving in the War Years* explores the themes of identity when one never possessed the original language, never told the original story, never resided in the harmony of legitimate heterosexuality in the garden of culture, and so cannot base identity on a myth or a fall from innocence and a right to natural names, mother's or father's" ("A Manifesto" 199).

But by avoiding the issue of how Moraga uses lesbianism as an avenue to the wholeness that "A Manifesto" presumes she should reject, Haraway leaves lesbianism untheorized. Lesbianism becomes the unrepresentable, the invisible. This leads to the return of lesbianism as an originary identity in "A Manifesto."

Though lesbianism remains suppressed in Haraway's essay, it can be traced in an unarticulated subtext. For example, in the section "Fractured Identities," Haraway critiques Catharine MacKinnon (1982) for reproducing the "appropriating, totalizing tendencies of Western theories of identity grounding action" (183). The critique implies--but never directly states--a complaint against the heterosexism of MacKinnon's work. Haraway says:

MacKinnon's radical theory of experience is totalizing in the extreme; it does not so much marginalize as obliterate the authority of any other women's political speech and action. It is a totalization producing what Western patriarchy itself never succeeded in doing--feminists' consciousness of the non-existence of women, except as products of men's desire" (183).

The "other woman" who is obliterated in MacKinnon's work and marginalized in Haraway's would be, according to the logic of Haraway's argument, the woman who is not

constituted by men's desire. In some theoretical circles, this subject-position is occupied by the lesbian.<sup>5</sup> De Lauretis, whose work Haraway compares favorably to MacKinnon's, has since written the critique of MacKinnon that Haraway suggests but does not elaborate in "A Manifesto." De Lauretis argues that "MacKinnon's absolutist emphasis on the (hetero)sexual monopoly of 'male power' . . . unmitigated by any possibility of resistance or agency through normative or autonomous forms of female sexuality (excessive, subversive, perverse, invert, or lesbian sexual practices), unintentionally works to recontain both feminist consciousness and female sexuality" (1990, 127).

The positioning of lesbianism as "A Manifesto's" concealed fantasy of origin is most apparent in Haraway's conclusion, which installs the lesbian writer as an unacknowledged prototype of the cyborg theorist. As it progresses, Haraway's essay becomes increasingly interested in the erotic aspects of cyborg identities. It celebrates "illegitimate fusions of animal and machine . . . the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire . . . and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of 'Western' identity" (199). Although it names the "fusions of animal and machine" as examples of couplings that will undo heterosexual structures of desire, the essay is by

implication concerned as well with the subversiveness of couplings between women and women. But because Haraway does not directly address the issue of lesbianism, its subversive potential is effaced; in effect, lesbianism remains outside the economy of desire as a sort of absent presence.

Haraway's interest in an eroticism that will undo the "mundane fiction of Man and Woman" (203) emerges in her discussion of texts that elaborate a cyborg myth. She lists a series of writers whom she identifies as "theorists for cyborgs" (197), a list that includes several writers who are recognized as part of a lesbian literary tradition--Joanna Russ, Monique Wittig, and Luce Irigaray--although Haraway does not identify them as lesbian. Haraway then refers to Adrienne Rich and to Audre Lorde, two lesbian writers who have been important to the development of U.S. lesbian-feminist thought, in her discussion of how the ideology of American radical feminists falls short of theorizing a cyborg myth. Against them, she positions Moraga as an author of cyborg writing. This last section of the essay might be read as an attempt to imagine a conversation among lesbian writers about the viability of the cyborg as "a myth of political identity."

I have been arguing that privileging the visible (as Haraway and Moraga do) takes part in the discourses that naturalize socially-constructed categories of racial

difference, and that this privileging elides other identities that are not constructed as visible (e.g., lesbianism in Haraway's work), with the result that these identities remain unexamined. How the issue of visibility resonates between the identities "woman of color" and "lesbian" can be approached in reading two authors who take up the question of sexual style, Sue-Ellen Case and Judith Butler. In her essay "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," Case explicitly theorizes the connection between the identities woman of color and lesbian in her indictment of the feminist community's history of racism and homophobia. Butler, on the other hand, does not address racial difference in her analysis of sexual style in *Gender Trouble*, but her final chapter on male drag and on butch and femme stances as "performative subversions" of regulatory gender identities has implications for a study of visibility that includes women of color.

Case's work is part of a fairly recent (since the early eighties) effort to reclaim butch and femme sexual styles as a valid aspect of lesbian cultural heritage. This movement responds to the lesbian-feminist redefinition of butch and femme styles<sup>6</sup> as an anachronism and an embarrassment. With the rise of feminism in the seventies, the conventions of "role-play" within the bar culture of the fifties and sixties were suppressed in favor of a more androgynous lesbian-feminist chic which, theoretically at

least, refused the heterosexual roles that butch and femme styles were said to imitate. Case, along with other critics such as Judy Grahn and Joan Nestle, not only challenges the assumption that butch and femme styles are imitative of heterosexuality, but also argues that feminism's rejection of role-play is tied to issues of class and race as well as gender and is symptomatic of the tension between middle-class white feminists who historically tended not to play obvious roles and working-class women and women of color who did so more often.<sup>7</sup> The rejection of butch and femme styles by middle- and upper-class women was frequently tinged with the condescending implication that role-play was evidence of the backwardness, conservatism, and confusion of working-class lesbians, who were generally depicted as victims of patriarchal brainwashing.<sup>8</sup>

Case describes feminism's impact on the lesbian community as "a compulsory adaptation of lesbian identification" to more orthodox sensibilities in which the sense of community shifted from "one of working-class, often women-of-color lesbians to that of white upper-middle-class heterosexual women who predominated in the early women's movement" (285). She sets out to correct what she terms the "ghosting of the lesbian subject" in contemporary feminist criticism:

regard the feminist genuflection of the 1980's-- the catechism of "working-class-women of color"-- feminist theorists feel impelled to invoke at the outset of their research. What's wrong with this



picture? It does not include the lesbian position. In fact, the isolation of the social dynamics of race and class successfully relegates sexual preference to an attendant position, so that even if the lesbian were to appear, she would be as a bridesmaid and never the bride" (284).

Case wants to dissolve the isolation of these axes of difference from one another and to correct the exclusion of sexual preference from the litany by working her way back to a historical subject that has been theorized out of existence by heterosexual feminist critics. The effort to recover that subject for lesbian culture is important because the dismissal of roles was often enabled by the class and race privilege of women who did not identify as butch or femme.

But the address of classism in Case's essay invokes less palpable forms of class and race essentialism than the discrimination she calls attention to. In describing the operations of classism, the essay sets up an opposition between middle-class and working-class lesbians that subtly bestows the working-class lesbian with an aura of authenticity that is withheld from the middle and upper classes. The construction of this authenticity can be traced through discourses of sexuality and race which, while they are not fully articulated together, intertwine to locate the subject position "butch-femme." The most explicit reference to the overlap of those discourses is the essay's mention of Jean Genet's play *The Blacks* (1960),

in which the artifices of camp are used to satirize the mechanisms of racism: "*The Blacks* displaced the camp critique from homophobia to racism, in which 'black' stands in for 'queer' and the campy queen of the bars is transformed into an 'african queen.' This displacement is part of the larger use of the closet and gay camp discourse to articulate other social realities" (289). Here camp deconstructs dominant discourses on both racial difference and homosexuality with a multi-layered parody of the figure of the "queen" that plays on stereotypes of the "noble savage" and the "fag." Elsewhere in the essay, however, racial difference does not remain fully inscribed in the camp discourse that liberates from "the rule of naturalism, or realism" (287), but through the search for "historical specificity" and "social reality" is instead reconstructed to signify authenticity.

This is evident in the essay's analyses of the way that gay camp discourse has been appropriated and sanitized by straight theorists in whose work the non-white subject is positioned as a marker of authenticity:

the sirens of sublation may be found in the critical maneuvers of heterosexual feminist critics who metaphorize butch-femme roles, transvestites, and campy dressers into a 'subject who masquerades,' as they put it, or is 'carnavalesque,' or even, as some are so bold to say, who 'cross-dresses.' . . . [these borrowings] evacuate the historical, butch-femme couple's sense of masquerade and cross-dressing the way a cigar-store Indian evacuates the historical dress and behavior of the Native American. As is often the case, illustrated by the cigar-store Indian,

these symbols may only proliferate when the social reality has been successfully obliterated and the identity has become the private property of the dominant class. (289)

The cigar-store Indian metaphor refers to the implementation of cultural appropriation to gain control over the colonized. Without minimizing that point, the essay's use of racial difference as a privileged signifier of colonization bears consideration. Some connection arguably exists between the essay's construction of authenticity and its reliance on a mystique about ethnicity that depends on the construction of ethnicity as a visible difference. This is apparent in the essay's positioning of the butch and femme couple in relation to the Native American as a cultural and racial minority. The Native American bears the weight of the analogy between the two terms by functioning as a signifier of the colonization of an indigenous, original "native" population. The cigar-store Indian represents the caricature of cultural difference on which that colonization is based by emphasizing the symbols of "Indianness" we learn from popular culture--most likely feathers, war paint, and brown skin. The Native American's visual signification of both cultural imperialism and authenticity is then carried over to the butch and femme couple by comparison. Katie King describes this transference of meaning from one sign to another as the "magical" quality of signs invested with political value: "Signs have a sort of magic attached to

them, and magic operates by contiguity, or nearness, in other words, it works by rubbing off on you" (83). In Case's argument, then, the association of the butch-femme couple with the Native American brings the former even closer to "social reality," so that the "ghosting of the lesbian subject" is corrected by "coloring" her in.

This shift toward authenticity seems at odds with the essay's interest in camp as a discourse that liberates from "the rule of naturalism, or realism" (Case 287). Within the cigar-store Indian metaphor, the separation of the signifier from its original referent is construed as having a negative political value, and rightly so given the genocidal policies that produced that split. But in the context of an argument in which such splitting has a positive political value when it occurs around gender difference (as when Case playfully explains that "the female body, the male gaze, and the structures of realism are only sex toys for the butch-femme couple" (297)), the repudiation of artificiality and caricature raises the issue of how discourses about race and gender/sexuality coalesce and what they reveal/conceal about each other.

In her discussion of homophobia in the black community in *Talking Back* (1989), bell hooks argues that it is exactly the specificity of visibility to people of color that is concealed in analogies between homophobia and racism. I cite her argument not as a corrective to Case's

but to expand the analysis of how visibility works in those knots where discourses about race and sexuality converge. While hooks describes how analogy reproduces rather than deconstructs oppression by emphasizing sameness, she gets caught up in the same paradigms of visibility that enable Case's Indian metaphor to begin with. hooks suggests that white lesbians and gays who attempt to "make gay experience and black experience of oppression synonymous" are in danger of "minimizing or diminishing the particular problems of people of color in the face of a white-supremacist society" (125). She explains that: "there is a significant difference that arises between [the experiences of gays and people of color] because of the visibility of dark skin. Often, homophobic attacks on gay people occur in situations where knowledge of sexual preference is indicated or established--outside of gay bars, for example. While it in no way lessens the severity of such suffering for gay people, or the fear that it causes, it does mean that in a given situation the apparatus of protection and survival may be simply not identifying as gay. In contrast, most people of color have no choice" (125). While hooks's point about not making different oppressions synonymous is well-taken, her explanation of the differences between gay and black experiences of oppression conceives of the category of racial difference too narrowly in terms of the visible. In spite of the qualifier in the

last sentence cited ("most" people of color), the argument does not address the situation of people of color who do "have a choice," who are light-skinned enough to pass for white. Further, it overlooks the discrimination that some members of the lesbian and gay community (and the heterosexual one, for that matter) will suffer for their nonconformity to the normative visible codes for gender identity no matter how they "choose" to identify.<sup>9</sup> Some men are perceived as femme and some women are perceived as butch no matter how hard they try to conform. For hooks as for Case, there is a hierarchy of oppressions in which skin color is the privileged signifier. The complexities of passing are elided from their discussions of race and gender because they threaten the identities that the two writers define on the basis of visibility.

This elision is most conspicuous in Case's essay when she calls attention to the invisibility of working-class white and women of color in the feminist movement. Quoting Joan Nestle's commentary on the classism of middle-class feminists, the essay glosses an overt reference to passing:

I wonder why there is such a consuming interest in the butch-fem lives of upper-class women, usually more literary figures, while real-life, working butch-fem women are seen as imitative and culturally backward . . . the reality of passing women, usually a working-class lesbian's method of survival, has provoked very little academic lesbian-feminist interest. (286)

In spite of the essay's attention to racial difference elsewhere, here there is no comment on the diverse meanings

of the word "passing." The contexts in which a lesbian might pass are multiple: is she passing for a man, passing for straight, passing for white? This oversight is inconsistent with the pointed inclusion of women of color in Case's description of pre-feminist lesbian identification. The question then is why she is uninterested in the issue of passing at this moment in the essay. One answer might be that if the white lesbian is authenticated through contiguity with a figure who visibly signifies racial difference, then the woman of color who can pass for white does not register as a sign. When racial difference is narrowed to the purely visible, the passing figure becomes unrepresentable.

In Case's development of "the theoretical maneuver that could become the butch and femme subject position" (289), the femme can be compared to the woman of color who passes for white because she too is excluded from the paradigm of visibility. Within the butch and femme economy, the butch emerges as visible while the femme is included in the identity "lesbian" through her association with the butch. In making this comparison between the femme and the woman of color who can pass for white, my essay replicates the problematic argument by analogy that I trace in Case's essay. It also shifts from considering theory that invokes racial difference as a magical sign to considering theory that doesn't refer to racial difference, paradoxically

resulting in the exclusion of women of color from my initial analysis of butch and femme sexual styles. The problematic structure of my essay and of the essays I read points to the lack of an effective theoretical apparatus with which to combine discussions of race and gender/sexuality in ways that do not catch us up in the paradigms we attempt to deconstruct, including the enactment of white privilege.

Early in her essay Case rejects the historical stereotypes of both the butch and the femme represented in Del Martin and Pyllis Lyon's 1972 book *Lesbian/Woman*: "If the butches are savages in this book, the femmes are lost heterosexuals who damage birthright lesbians by forcing them to play the butch role" (Case 285). But as her theory of the butch-femme subject position unfolds, the association of femininity with passivity creeps back into her argument in spite of her efforts to foreground the femme's active performance of the masquerade of femininity. This is perhaps a result not so much of the essay's assumption of the femme's passivity, but of its emphasis on the visible performance of the difference between lesbian and straight sexuality. It is in the process of describing this performance that the femme is relegated to a secondary position. For example, in its discussion of feminist theatre company Split Britches' stage production of *Beauty and the Beast*, the essay observes that "the butch, who



represents by her clothing the desire for other women, becomes the beast--the marked taboo against lesbianism dressed up in the clothes of that desire. Beauty [the femme] is the desired one and the one who aims her desirability at the butch" (294). According to Case, this "portrayal is faithful to the historical situation of the butch role, as Nestle describes it: "[the butches I knew] did announce themselves as tabooed women who were willing to identify their passion for other women by wearing clothes that symbolized the taking of responsibility."<sup>10</sup>

In each of these passages the butch is represented as the desiring subject while the femme is represented as the object of desire. Thus, while the essay suggests that "the butch-femme couple inhabit the subject position together-- 'you can't have one without the other'" (Case 283), it could be argued that another meaning behind the phrase is something like "a femme's not queer without her butch." While the butch can stand alone as "the marked taboo against lesbianism," the femme is invisible as a lesbian unless she is playing to a butch. Joanne Loulan notes that this tendency to see femmes as lesbian only in relation to butches is similar to "how heterosexual women have been treated as if they have no identity apart from their husbands" (90). Joan Nestle makes a similar point in remarking that femmes are

the victims of a double dismissal: in the past they did not appear culturally different enough

from heterosexual women to be seen as breaking gender taboos, and today they do not appear feminist enough, even in their historical context, to merit attention or respect for being ground-breaking women" (1992, 140).

For good reasons, it has become pejorative to suggest any comparison of butch and femme dynamics to heterosexual ones, but Loulan's and Nestle's comments do strike a chord of recognition.

The representation of the butch as the authentic lesbian has a long tradition that is characterized in literary circles by the classic representation of lesbianism in *The Well of Loneliness*, which functioned as a "coming out novel" for over forty years, from its publication in the twenties through the fifties and sixties when pulp fiction provided women with easier access to other stories about lesbianism. Judy Grahn's history of lesbian and gay life *Another Mother Tongue* (1984), which argues for the existence of an ancient and continuous queer culture, attests to the persistent construction of the butch as "magical sign." Grahn celebrates the butch as a mythical shaman figure (here again Grahn's attribution of tribal roots to the butch constructs racial difference as marker of the butch's authenticity) that is a key member of the "core or heart group that are made up of the blatantly Gay, the queens and bulldykes" (85). Grahn describes these figures as the culture's "historians and 'true' practitioners, its fundamentalists, traditionalists, and old-

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timers, the orthodox who . . . retain the culture in a continuous line from one century to another." Further, Grahn suggests that: "All other Gay people in the current culture line themselves and measure their own behavior in relation to this core or heart group on a continuum stretching into its extreme opposite, which is assimilation or the imitation of heterosexual stereotypes for the purpose of camouflage, that is, closetry, being 'in the closet' (85). The glorification of the butch as authentic lesbian is based on her "blatant" representation of sexual deviance, and this in turn implies ambiguity and confusion around the femme's sexual identity. The femme's adaptation of what has been historically defined as a "feminine" sexual style is tacitly constructed as evidence of her desire to pass for straight and not of her desire for other women.

It is interesting that Grahn expresses a certain resistance to the insecurity of the femme's position within the lesbian community that her "continuum" of homosexuality suggests. She says that the femme role was often characterized as boring, passive, and unliberated (157-58), and that she felt devalued when she played the femme herself:

however well I imitated the butches in that particular competitive underground bar scene, I soon learned that I was not going to make it as a butch, at least not all of the time. . . . I had to give up and play the femme although I much preferred being seen as a butch. I am as much a

ceremonial dike as [my butch lover] was, and I resented giving up any part of my hardwon subterranean status" (157, 159-60).

Comments like these hint at a critique of the femme's negative or dubious status within lesbian subculture that is never elaborated in Grahn's work. Rather, Grahn implies that the problem is intrinsic to the femme "role" and not to the process by which political value is attached to some sexual styles but not others. Loulan, on the other hand, attributes the devaluation of the femme to the lesbian community's internalization of sexist mainstream values that find something abhorrent about the feminine. She argues that "femme lesbians are given little room in the lesbian-feminist community to create an open identity that is strongly lesbian--powerful, vibrant, and far from passive. Femme lesbians have to struggle to claim space within the lesbian erotic circle" (1990, 88).

The conflation of sexual style with what might be termed "sexual consciousness" underlies the association of the femme with the stereotypically passive heterosexual woman. By sexual consciousness I mean the sensibilities that are ascribed to sexual identities. Again, *The Well of Loneliness* will serve as an example. Hall alludes to the special insight and sensitivities, the "super-nerves" of the butch lesbian, as opposed to her lovers, whose femininity or "normality" makes them betray Stephen (1982, 155 and 423). The butch's sexual style is perceived as

expressive of her radical lesbian consciousness. As Wittig puts it in her discussion of the lesbian in "One is Not Born a Woman," the butch's "masculine" style "proves that she escaped her initial programming" (49). Accordingly, the femme's sexual style is perceived as expressive of her subjection to heterosexual definitions of femininity.

The conflation of sexual style with sexual consciousness assumes a natural relationship between the visible signifiers of sexual style and their signified sexual identity. This last section of my essay attempts to deconstruct that relationship by reconfiguring the lesbian femme through a reading of "Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions" from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. While Butler goes a long way towards denaturalizing the relationship between visible signifiers and the gendered identities they signify, her overriding focus on the body as "the site [read also "sight"] of dissonant and denaturalized performances" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 146) renders the femme's challenge to the compulsory practice of heterosexuality invisible. The femme can be read as the "blind spot" in Butler's notion of gender as a performance that will "construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction" (138, my emphasis). The femme might be considered the and that cannot be contained in Butler's either/or paradigm; she both constructs the

illusion of an interior gendered self (she looks like a straight woman) and parodies it (what you see isn't what you get). Bringing the femme to the foreground elucidates the limitations of the expressive model of gender/sexual identity.

A brief summary of Butler's strategy for denaturalizing gender identity will be useful here. Butler's genealogy rests on deconstructing the normative paradigm that figures a correspondence among sex, gender, and sexuality. In turn, this rests on an inner/outer distinction which "stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject" (*Gender Trouble* 134). This binary locates the "self" within the body and reads the body as a reflection of the "truth" of that self. In terms of gender identity, this means that the male body should contain a masculine self and the female body a feminine self, and that each body's desires will be regulated by the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. Butler explains that the inner/outer distinction "makes sense only with reference to a mediating boundary that strives for stability" (134)--the body. Her focus, then, is on how the illusion of the inner/outer distinction, of "the fiction of heterosexual coherence," is produced on the body, and specifically on how some bodies reveal that coherence to be illusory by refusing integration (136-37).

Using drag as an example, Butler shows how the refusal of integration challenges the stability of the subject. Drag, she says, "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of true gender identity" (137). Her annotated citation of Esther Newton's 1972 book on female impersonation, *Mother Camp*, exemplifies how drag achieves this subversion:

At its most complex, [drag] is a double inversion that says, 'appearance is an illusion.' Drag says [Newton's curious personification] 'my "outside" appearance is feminine, but my essence "inside" [the body] is masculine.' At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; 'my appearance "outside" [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence "inside" [myself] is feminine.'" (Newton quoted in Butler 137, Butler's interpolations)

While Butler's analysis of drag effectively illustrates the subversion of the inner/outer distinction, her reliance on the trope of visibility becomes a limitation when she discusses butch and femme roles as sexual styles that also parody the notion of true gender identity. In focusing on the visual evidence of subversion, Butler, like Case and Grahn, is forced to privilege the butch as the figure that represents the radical discontinuity of sexual and gender identities since the femme appears to be an integrated, stable subject according to the rules of normative heterosexuality.

In a strategy of destabilization which relies on the visual performance of difference, the fact that no

distinction between "inner" and "outer" identities is made visible on the surface of the femme's body as it is on the drag queen's and the butch's bodies marginalizes the femme. Even as Butler refutes the common idea that butch and femme replicate heterosexual gender role stereotyping, she flounders over how to describe the femme in relation to heterosexual constructs. At one point, she suggests that "lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time" (123), but she does not elaborate on how this displacement occurs. In Butler's only extended comment on the femme, the femme is less an object of interest herself than an optical instrument used to look at the butch as a figure of destabilized identities. Because the femme does not present the kind of surface-text that Butler wants to theorize, Butler must look through rather than at the femme:

As one lesbian femme explained, she likes her boys to be girls, meaning that "being a girl" contextualizes and resignifies "masculinity" in a butch identity. As a result, that masculinity, if that it can be called, is always brought into relief against a culturally intelligible "female body." It is precisely this dissonant juxtaposition and the sexual tension that its transgression generates that constitute the object of desire. In other words, the object [and clearly, there is not just one] of lesbian-femme desire is neither some decontextualized female body nor a discrete yet superimposed masculine identity, but the destabilization of both terms as they come into erotic interplay. (123)<sup>11</sup>

Here Butler explains the femme's radical discontinuity through recourse to the presumed object of her desire--the



butch, who visibly destabilizes gender categories. In framing her analyses in the context of the femme's desire, Butler invokes the terms of the inner/outer distinction that she wants to undo. The femme's radical desire is understood to offset her normative external appearance, and so that desire is produced as internal. In effect, the femme cannot be conceptualized except as part of a unit in which her desire is constructed as internal to the butch's external expression of that desire. Butler's expectation of coherence between (outer) sexual style and (inner) sexual consciousness puts her back within the framework of culturally intelligible identities which she seeks to destabilize. In the process of illustrating how the sexual styles of drag queens and butches visually denaturalize the categories of sex and gender by producing signs of their nonconformity to heterosexual norms on the body, Butler establishes them as coherent subjects in terms of political rather than gender intelligibility. That is to say, radical consciousness is ascribed to radical appearance. The flip side of this equation is that orthodox ("straight"?) consciousness is ascribed to conventional appearance.

An analysis of the femme's invisibility in theories of gender/sexual identity does have implications for lesbians of color. The movement of this essay away from issues of race as it takes up issues of sexual style signals the presumption of lesbianism as white lesbianism, a

presumption that reflects my own investments along lines of race, gender, and sexuality. In different ways, each of the white critics I read in this essay also runs up against the problem of how to talk about several identities without privileging one over the others: Haraway foregrounds racial difference while lesbianism enters her argument as a sort of absent presence; Case speaks about both racial difference and sexuality but sometimes racial difference functions as a "magical sign" that locates sexual style in her argument, and her essay, like my own, tends to neglect racial difference as it develops an argument about butch and femme; and Butler speaks only discourses of gender and sexual identity.

The difficulty that white critics have in maintaining a simultaneous discussion of race and lesbianism betrays two related and racist assumptions. The first is, as Ekua Omosupe puts it, the assumption of "a position of authority or the privilege to universalize lesbian experiences as white lesbian experience" (105). The second is, as Jewelle Gomez puts it, the assumption that "race, not sex or gender, [is] the predominant feature in any discussion of work by women of color" (47). Each of these assumptions contributes to the double invisibility of the lesbian of color within the white lesbian community; she is invisible first as a lesbian, and then there is no perception of her sexual style (if she claims one) within the identity

"lesbian." In her essay for the *Empathy* issue on visibility and invisibility, Sharon Lim-Hing explains how, for whites, markers of racial difference are so totalizing that they preclude any recognition of the existence and individuality of non-white members of the lesbian and gay community: "the first thing many of you would think if you walked into the room and saw me is 'Asian woman.' Not young, old, badly or well dressed, intellectual, punk, jock, diesel dyke, girlie girl, etc.--just 'Asian.' Whites get to play all the roles, while Asians are invisible or are stuck in a few stereotypes" (21). If we pursue the racist logic of this layered invisibility and add to it the invisibility of the lesbian femme, it follows that the woman of color who identifies as femme may be triply erased. That is to say, while a butch woman of color might not be recognized as a lesbian because she is not white, she might be perceived as a lesbian because her sexual style is considered "blatant." A femme woman of color, on the other hand, will probably not be recognized as lesbian, first because she is not white and then because she is not butch.

The experience of racism complicates the perception of sexual styles for women of color. In the African-American lesbian community, for example, the rejection of "role-play" is not based simply on the characterization of butch and femme styles as imitative of heterosexuality. It also includes a resistance to the homophobic stereotype of the

black lesbian as "bulldagger," a pejorative term within (and outside) the black community used to signal the lesbian as a woman who wants to be a man. This means that elevation of the butch to the status of mythical figure that is prevalent in the white lesbian community is often qualified for some African-American lesbians by an impulse to distance themselves from the image of the butch. Barbara Christian, for example, argues that it is by breaking the "bulldagger" stereotype that black lesbians will be seen as women (200). Some women also describe feeling forced into the "butch role" because they have acquired a certain toughness that is perceived as masculine in order to survive. Omosupe says that "encoded in this accusation 'women acting like men,' were many of the things that my mother had socialized into me as a way of helping to assure my survival and to minimize my defeats in a racist, sexist society" (103). This means that many black lesbians feel they are denied any presumption of a choice among roles that white women have. They adopt a stance perceived as butch out of the need for self-protection. In her "biomythographical" novel *Zami*, Audre Lorde explains that her rejection of the butch stance rose from the painful recognition of its compensatory nature for many black women; for her, it signalled rather than concealed the vulnerability of black lesbians in a racist, sexist, and homophobic society: "The Black women I saw [in the Village

gay bars of the fifties] were into heavy roles, and it frightened me. This was partly the fear of my own Blackness mirrored, and partly the realities of the masquerade. Their need for power and control seemed a much-too-open piece of myself, dressed in enemy clothing (224). . . . we seldom looked into each other's Black eyes, lest we see our aloneness and our own blunted power mirrored in the pursuit of darkness" (226).

Within the African-American lesbian community, the understanding of how some identities mask others may also heighten the awareness of the black femme's triple jeopardy. Again, Lorde speaks to the erasure of the femme when she recalls her experience of role-play in the fifties bar-scene as oppressive and intimidating: "By white america's racist distortions of beauty, Black women playing 'femme' had very little chance. . . . There was constant competition among butches to have the most 'gorgeous femme,' on their arm. And 'gorgeous' was defined by a white male world's standards" (224). This is not to say that Black lesbian femmes did not exist. In fact, Lorde herself portrays Kitty, a femme that she meets at a party, with loving attention to the details of her sexual style, lingering over the descriptions of Kitty's clothes, hair, perfume, lipstick, and mannerisms. And though Lorde characterizes the femme role as passive at one point, here the power of Kitty's eroticism is emphasized by her direct

and "calmly erotic gaze," her fashionable outfit, her effortless dancing, and even the name of her lipstick, "a new Max Factor shade called 'WARPAINT'" (243).

While white lesbians may be oblivious to the range of sexual styles among women of color, Lorde's work indicates that women of color are acknowledging and theorizing butch and femme identities as well as styles that do not fit the traditional categories of "roleplay."<sup>12</sup> Writings by women of color that address how issues of racism intertwine with issues of sexual style confirm the presence of a hierarchy of visible markers of difference which radical theories of subjectivity are still unable to evade. The need to dismantle this hierarchy forms the basis of my critique of grounding radical political identity in the visible emblems of difference. I do not want to obscure that the impulse to privilege the visible often arises out of the need to reclaim signifiers of difference which dominant ideologies have used to define minority identities negatively. But while this strategy of reclamation is often affirming, it can also replicate the practices of dominant ideologies which use visibility to create social categories on the basis of exclusion. The paradigm of visibility is totalizing when a signifier of difference becomes synonymous with the identity it signifies. In this situation, members of a given population who do not bear that signifier of difference or who bear visible signs of

another identity are rendered invisible and are marginalized within an already marginalized community.

By way of conclusion, I suggest that the relationship between a visible signifier of difference and its signified identity might be complicated. I propose that more attention be paid to the differences within the identities that are the subject of theory. For example, within the community of drag queens that Judith Butler analyzes, how would her theory about the destabilization of culturally intelligible gender identities apply differently to drag queens who play up the juxtaposition of the "masculine" and the "feminine" (e.g., by letting razor stubble show through their makeup) and those who mimic culturally intelligible gender identities by presenting a unified image of "woman" (e.g., straight guys ask them out when they're in drag)? Following this line of thought, it seems crucial that we consider how various individuals conceptualize their positions within specific configurations of the visible. Attention to ambivalence about self-image in the context of both hegemonic and subcultural values should be particularly relevant to analyzing the politics of visibility. In taking up the issue of what I have described as privileging the visible signifier of difference, I do not mean to suggest that visibility is not an arena in which to engage questions about radical subjectivities. Rather, it is my argument that we should continue to

complicate our ideas about what counts as radical self-representation for minority identities.

### Notes

1. In "The situation of lesbianism as feminism's magical sign," Katie King describes this phenomenon as the reduction of whole systems of signifiers to a single privileged signifier. She gives as examples "the metonymic reduction of 'race' to 'Black,' wherein 'Black' becomes the symbol for all consideration of racism;" the reduction of "oppression" to the oppression of women such that other forms of oppression become invisible; and the elevation of lesbianism as a symbol of feminist consciousness such that the actual "practice" of lesbianism becomes peripheral to the concept that it becomes for both lesbians and non-lesbians.

2. For a reading of this slippage in the work of Anglo-American feminists see Norma Alarcon's, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism."

3. Butler's later books in this series called *Xenogenesis* are *Adulthood Rites* (1988) and *Imago* (1989).

4. See also Haraway's "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Constitutions of Self in Immune System Discourse" (1989) for a reading of Butler.

5. I am thinking in particular of Monique Wittig's "One Is Not Born A Woman," in which she says: "Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically" (53).

6. Throughout the essay I use the phrase "butch and femme styles" instead of the more common "butch-femme roleplay." I choose not to hyphenate the terms "butch" and "femme" in order to construct them as identities that exist separately as well as in combination. To me, the hyphenated version seems to preclude considering the terms independently of one another or in other combinations (such as butch-but and femme-femme). I will also use the term "role-play" in quotations, indicating my agreement with Joan Nestle's (1987, 103) questioning of this term as one which implies that butch and femme are imitative of heterosexual gender roles and so denies the complexity of butch and femme experiences.



7. On the connections between class and butch and femme styles, see Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy's "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960"; Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls And Twilight Lovers*; and Joan Nestle's collection of personal narratives by butch and femme women, *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader*.

8. See Joan Nestle's "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s" and Bonnie Zimmerman's *The Safe Sea of Women* (113) for discussions of the redefinition of butch and femme styles as an anachronism during the seventies. Lillian Faderman also discusses butch and femme styles in terms of class relations in "Butches, Femmes, and Kikis: Creating Lesbian Subcultures in the 1950's and 60's" from *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*. Unfortunately, the tension between working-class and middle-class lesbians is replicated as well as described in her work, as when she suggests that middle and upper-class lesbians were able to reject the "heterogenderal pattern[s] of 'roleplay' because of their ability to articulate a more feminist politics than working-class lesbians" (167).

9. Here hooks invokes a rhetoric of choice which is frequently assumed around the idea of homosexuality, but which does not describe the experience of all gays. For example, Joanne Loulan quotes Esther Newton's observation that flexibility about sexual style can become an imperative which assumes a rhetoric of choice that not all lesbians feel applies to their experience. Newton says: "What's frustrating to me is the new trend to say: 'You know, gee, I like to wear my jack boots one night and my high heels the next. Gee, I can express all these parts of me, it's kind of camp.' . . . For some of us it's not that at all! Some of us want to go deeper and deeper into one thing, and that's just as good" (quoted in Loulan 1990, 123-124).

10. Joan Nestle quoted in Sue-Ellen Case, 294. For other perspectives on butch-femme role play, see Cherrie Moraga's and Amber Hollibaugh's "What We/re Rollin Around in Bed With: Sexual Silences in Feminism," in *Powers of Desire* (394-405). Hollibaugh qualifies the apparent passivity of the femme by asserting her sense of her own power and subversiveness. Moraga expresses her frustration with the expectation that the butch will always assume sexual responsibility, suggesting that her discomfort with her own "femininity" is perpetuated by the rigidity of traditional role-playing. See also Madeline Davis's and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy's "Oral History and the Study of Sexuality in the Lesbian Community: Buffalo, New York, 1940-1960." The researchers discuss the discrepancy between

popular images of the "stone" butch and "passive" femme and the sexual experiences recalled by women they interviewed. They suggest that there was a broad "range of sexual desires that were built into the framework of role-defined sexuality" (19).

11. Though Butler points out that there is more than one object of lesbian femme desire, she does not explore the options. This inattention reinforces my argument that, for Butler, the femme's radical discontinuity is only evident in her association with the butch. It is as if the femme has no lesbian identity outside the butch-femme economy.

12. For example, the term "ki-ki" seems to encompass a range of sexual styles that don't quite fit conventional definitions of butch or femme. In the fifties ki-ki seems to have been used most often in a pejorative sense. Audre Lorde, for example, says that it was a term used to disparage "the 'freaky' bunch of lesbians who weren't into roleplay" and that the same name was used for lesbians who turned tricks (178). Loulan explains its more current and more flattering usage as a term which "describes women who move easily from butch to femme and back again" (143).

## Afterword

As I suggested in my introduction, one of my aims in this project has been to challenge the primacy of the visible in identity-politics by examining how investing certain signifiers with political value both fetishizes those signifiers and renders subjects who do not present those signifiers invisible, excluding them from the given field of identity. The present study has traced how race and sexual identities are configured through structures of visibility and invisibility by concentrating on a series of figures that emerge as focal points for issues of visibility--the lesbian femme, the butch, the fairy, the primitive, the white Creole, and the black lesbian, among others. Even within the parameters of the texts that this project reads, I can imagine explorations of visibility that would be based on different figures.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to *The Well of Loneliness* to suggest one direction that an alternative exploration might take. As a figure of indecipherability in the novel, the femme has a parallel in the figure of the Jew, whom *The Well* constructs as both white and not white. Adolphe Blanc, "the gentle and learned Jew," is introduced through Valerie as a guest who hovers around the fringes of her parties. Like Angela, Valerie, and Mary, Blanc signifies both whiteness and racial

difference. His name, the French for "white," contrasts with his physical description and his artistic sensibilities, which connote dark coloring and the "primitive." Blanc is "a quiet, tawny man with the eyes of the Hebrew," a "designer--a master of colour whose primitive tints had practically revolutionized taste, bringing back a joy for the simple" (351). The novel positions Blanc as both insider and outsider, depicting him on the periphery of the gay community, an observer more than a participant. At Valerie's parties, he stands "in a niche by himself, a pitiful spectator of what, to him, often seemed a bewildering scheme of creation" (352), and at the bars, he appears and disappears to Stephen in a ghostlike fashion, present only long enough to deliver her a message of salvation and identify her mission to reveal "the whole truth" about homosexuality and to "demand of the world compassion and justice" (389-90).

Blanc's speech in the bar echoes Valerie's speech about Stephen's work bringing her "into her kingdom," aligning the two characters in their acceptance of homosexual difference and their prophetic visions of Stephen as the spokesperson for the community. But while the novel remains ambivalent about Valerie, Blanc seems to succeed as a figure of salvation, a spiritual hero. I would argue that this is because the novel attempts to resolve its anxieties about the femme's sexual identity through the

figure of the Jew. The representation of the Jew makes explicit what is implicit in the representation of the femme: that the novel inscribes sexual identity within the discourses of the visible through tropes of racial difference. The difference, however, in the representation of each figure, is that while racial difference marks the femme as threatening, it marks the Jew as sympathetic.

*The Well* bases the sympathetic connection between the Jew and the homosexual on its assumption of the Jew's racial understanding of oppression, suffering, and identity crisis.<sup>1</sup> Further, the Jew's understanding of homosexual difference is posited as natural in terms of gender identification because he is already feminized according to racial stereotypes. In analyzing one psychoanalyst's case study of a Jewish patient, Sander Gilman explains the intertwining of discourses of race, gender and sexuality behind the representation of the Jew by pointing out that the physician sees "the body of the Jew as interchangeable with the body of the gay--physically different, exotic, feminine" (196). That ambiguities around racial and sexual identities are linked in Hall's representation of the sympathetic Jew is evident in the description of Blanc's past. The passage describing Blanc's struggle to accept his homosexual identity, signified by his predilection for effeminate occupations, is framed by references to his racial and religious differences:

A quiet, tawny man with the eyes of the Hebrew, in his youth he has been very deeply afflicted. He had spent his days going from doctor to doctor: 'What am I?' They had told him, pocketing their fees; not a few had unctuously set out to cure him. . . . There was no cure for Blanc, he was, of all men, the most normal abnormal. He had known revolt, renouncing his God; he had known despair, the despair of the godless; he had known moments of wild dissipation; he had known long months of acute self-abasement. And then he had suddenly found his soul, and that finding had brought with it resignation. . . . For a living he designed many beautiful things--furniture, costumes and scenery for ballets, even women's gowns if the mood was upon him, but this he did for a physical living. To keep life in the desolate, long-suffering soul, he had stored his mind with much profound learning. So now many poor devils went to him for advice. . . to this gentle and learned Jew went many a poor baptized Christian devil. (351-52)

Blanc functions as a regenerative figure in what remains a Christian fantasy of redemption in that his spirituality serves to correct the Christian church's lack of tolerance for homosexuality that Hall criticizes in the novel.<sup>2</sup>

It is the Jew's historical status as both white and not white that makes him acceptable as a figure of both sympathetic identification and redemption, while the femme remains a figure of impossible desire. The contradictory representations of the Jew as both able to pass for white and always revealed as other by telltale marks of difference allow him to be read as both same, and therefore trustworthy, and always readable in his difference, identifiable as other, and therefore safe. Paradoxically, the ambiguity around the Jew's racial identity effaces the threat which that ambiguity presents to boundaries of

self/other because it can always be read against itself; the non-Jewish subject can reason: "I can't see that the Jew is different, therefore s/he is the same as me; or I can see the Jew's difference, therefore s/he does not threaten my identity."<sup>3</sup>

The Jew recurs as a liminal figure with reference to issues of visibility and invisibility throughout the novels that this project reads: in *Invisible Man*, the question of Emerson's ethnic identity suggests that this section of the novel, which is about literary criticism among other things, might also be read in the context of Ellison's remarks to Irving Howe in "The Word and the Jug," in which Ellison suggests that Jewish "guilt" with regard to blacks is a result of a false sense of alignment with white oppressors; in *Strange Brother*, the Jew appears as Irving Hesse, the European, liberal-minded sexologist who offers pseudo-scientific defenses of homosexuality; in *Abeng*, I touched briefly on how Anne Frank stands as a figure for racial ambiguity in Clare's imagination. A fuller analysis of the figure of the Jew, which would require a study in and of itself, might produce different results, with different implications for the politics of visibility and invisibility.

It should also be clear that the politics of visibility has implications for the construction of dominant as well as marginalized identities; the texts I

read here show that whiteness and heterosexuality are as constructed by paradigms of visibility as are racial difference and homosexuality. This suggests that visibility politics are not new to the social movements of the late twentieth century. Perhaps then, it is not only by making identities themselves visible, but by making the politics of representation visible, that we can deconstruct the power relations of dominance and marginalization.

#### Notes

1. In "The Use of the Jew in West Indian Novels," Sue N. Greene discusses how the Jew is often used to develop the theme of identity because the figure of the wandering Jew symbolizes "homelessness," "selflessness," and "lack of identity" (151). See also Edward Said on the phenomenon of the European's "sympathetic identification" with the Jew in Romantic ideology (118).

2. Blanc's regenerative function in the novel might be considered in relation to Said's description of the tradition in Orientalist discourse of positing the "regeneration of Europe by Asia" (115).

3. Sander Gilman's book *The Jew's Body* explores how Jewishness is constructed as a visible difference.



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### **Vita**

Lisa Walker received her B.A. from Oberlin College in 1987, her M.A. from Louisiana State University in 1992, and is a candidate for the Ph.D. in December 1995. In September 1995, she will begin teaching as an assistant professor of English at the University of Southern Maine. Her book, *Looking Like What You Are: Race, Sexual Style, and the Construction of Identity*, is forthcoming from New York University Press.

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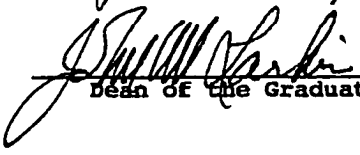
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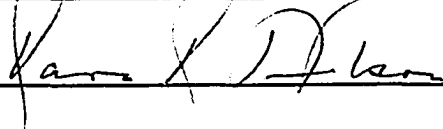
  
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